

# Finding Ways

*Community and its Challenges on  
Ahamb, Vanuatu*

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## Abstract

The thesis is based on six months of fieldwork in Vanuatu in 2010. The objective of the study is to examine ways in which community is produced and challenged on the small island of Ahamb, where I based most of my research.

Ahamb can be said to be a typical Melanesian “composite society” consisting of various patrilineal clans groups brought together by conversion processes in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The patrilineal clans are termed nasara, which is a two dimensional concept referring to both the designate clan group and the place it regards as its origin. About a half of the Ahamb population regard themselves as autochthonous to the island through their nasara membership, while the other half descend from migrants coming from the neighbouring big island of Malakula.

In the post-colonial era, land in Vanuatu has gained new material value by the government’s attempts to attract foreign investors by opening up for long term land leases that in practice works as sales. Land is what the subsistence farmers in the region of South Malakula live of, and population growth and increasing needs of money also enhance the value of land. These are some of the reasons for many pressing land disputes today that bring about indigenous essentialisations of nasara belonging, breaching of norms for social relationships, and which separate the community.

In the thesis I will concentrate mainly on the counter-logics to disputes and separation, that are instead based on cooperation and “togetherness”. These are expressed in the works of the church, the comprehensive and multiple bonds of kinship, and a general morality of gifts and acknowledgement of social relations. To understand Ahamb dynamics of separation and unity I will discuss Louis Dumont’s concept of value hierarchies. I suggest that the dominant values in Ahamb society is centred around the production of relationships that is a condition for the solidarity and unity that also advocates the production of community.

In addition to being a brief ethnography of Ahamb socio-cultural life, the thesis is a modest contribution to the discussions on Pacific island societies’ encounter with various external influences, among them Christianity.



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*Mandela and Alfred. Ahamb Island seen from the gardens of mainland Malakula*

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# 1 Introduction

It was a warm evening in February that I flagged down a *bas* (vans serving as public transportation) in Vanuatu's capital Port Vila. I had been in Vanuatu a little more than three weeks and was in search for an island community in which to do fieldwork. I hoped to be a step closer as I now coaxed out a crinkled piece of paper from my pocket and read out loud my destination to the driver: "20 Vatu nakamal" in "Freswota 4". During my first weeks I had learned to know Rosemary who worked at the guesthouse I stayed at in town. In one of our conversations she tipped me of an island where her cousin worked as a teacher. The island was Ahamb located just outside the south coast of Malakula, Vanuatu's second largest island.

For the last six months I had prepared a research project on interpretations of and responses to climate change discourses in a Vanuatu village community. I had been kindly granted a research permit by the Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta (VKS) and I was also to provide data to the Department of Meteorology on socio-cultural aspects of environmental hazards<sup>1</sup>. Rosemary told me that the people of Ahamb had arranged a grand community feast on New Years Eve a few weeks earlier. The reason was an expected relocation of its people to the mainland of Malakula, presumably because of a sea level rise (*solwota I stap kam antap*) attributed to climate change. Having learned that *place* carries heavy weight in Melanesian societies (Jolly 1994, Taylor 2008), I thought that either the climate change discourse or the environmental damage had to be of great force on Ahamb if it caused people to leave their place.

It was now Friday, and I had just returned from a trip to the northern Banks Islands. On my last day on Mota Lava I had accidentally runned into Daniela, a Canadian PhD-student, on the local airport. It turned out that Daniela knew a man from Ahamb living in the Port Vila neighbourhood of Freswota where she did research. This man was Michael, who ran the kava-bar "20 Vatu nakamal"<sup>2</sup>. I decided to seek out Michael as

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<sup>1</sup> VKS is a statutory body under the laws of Vanuatu and has as its primary focus "to support, encourage and make provision for the preservation, protection and development of various aspects of the cultural heritage of Vanuatu" (About the Vanuatu Cultural Centre 2005). VKS also approves and facilitates all research done in the country.

<sup>2</sup> Kava is a drink made from the roots of the kava plant (*Piper methysticum*). It is mildly intoxicating and enjoyed in many social contexts. A *nakamal* is the men's house in traditional Vanuatu societies, but is in town used about kava-bars (which in fact works as the modern gathering spot, especially for men).

soon as I returned to Vila to discuss my chance of going to Ahamb and stay for six months. The *bas* drove into many local neighbourhoods on its way, setting of passengers who had been in town. When we reached Freswota, the driver went down a side road and left me off by a head-high hedge. It was almost dark and I slipped through an opening in the hedge after being assured that this was the place I was looking for. What I entered was a rather large home garden in which a group of men were sitting on plastic chairs on the other side. I asked the first person I saw if Michael was in. A man in the group asked me to take his chair while he went looking for him. I felt awkward stepping into the garden disturbing the group of locals who were chatting, relaxing, and enjoying their kava. Shortly after, a mature but kind-looking man with short dreadlocks presented himself as Michael. I rose, shook his hand and introduced myself. In staggering Bislama, the national language of Vanuatu, I explained that I was a student of *kastom* and culture, and had been told about some sea level rise and relocation of Ahamb people. I said I was very interested in going to Ahamb learning about how these processes affected people's lives on the island.

I learned that most people gathered in Michael's garden that night were in fact Ahamb people stranded in town while waiting for a cargoship to take them back to the island. Among the people was *jif* Herold, a former chief of the Ahamb chief's council, and both he and the other people present said I was welcome to come with them to Ahamb. I felt very excited, but also relieved. The atmosphere was merry, and I said how much I wanted to engage in all kinds of activities on the island to learn properly about life in the community. There were many suggestions of what I should join into when arriving at the island. Someone invited me to dive for fish, others to hunt wild pigs and bats at night. Driven by curiosity and a romantic image of what participatory observation in a village setting was like, I gladly responded that I would join in all of these activities and more. Some young men of my own age showed cellphone photos of a beautiful Ahamb beach and a place by the church where ground had been eroded away by the sea. I was invited to drink kava and was offered food to eat. News also arrived about the cargoship Tina 1 including Ahamb as the first stop on its next trip north. I felt very comfortable in the company of the people I had just met, and was excited to join them on the ship scheduled to leave in just a few days.

At the dusk the following Friday, Port Vila's Star Wharf was filled with people and all kinds of cargo. Lucky for me I was soon recognised by Markriken who was in

Michael's garden the preceeding week. Markriken had spent the last three months in Vila after taking his son Samme to hospital. Because there had been no returning cargoships until this day, Markriken, Samme, and a large group of other Ahamb people had been stuck in town over Christmas. On the ship, women, children and some men made themselves a sleeping-area under the roof, while I joined some other men at the front deck. Here, we chatted and drank a bit of kava that someone had brought from Michael's. The kava was in a covert but laughing manner shared around to others in the area. The electric lights of Vila town gradually dwindled while stories and kava were shared in the good company. I slowly fell asleep to the steady noise of the engine and the splashing sea that was pushed aside on our northbound journey under the clear, starpacked sky.

Early the next morning we reached Ahamb and docked at its northern white sandy beach. I was welcomed by Hedrick Peter, who was the local fieldworker cooperating with the VKS, and David Leslie, whom the former VKS director Ralph Regenvanu had managed to contact the previous day to explain my errand. While crossing the beach to get to a house they had arranged for me, I tried my best to nod and say hello to everyone gathered on the beach<sup>3</sup>. The house was of traditional bamboo and thatch built a few years earlier for an American Peace Corps volunteer. A group went searching for the missing key to the house's padlock and I waited with David in the shade of a tree. As we saw Tina 1 cast off, the people on the beach came one by one to shake my hand before wandering off to their respective villages. I took a deep breath and felt happy about how everything had turned out. It was overwhelming and strange to suddenly be in an outer island village-context and that fieldwork was about to begin.

### ***Topic and Research Question***

As the weeks passed I gradually learned more about what engaged people on the island. This led me to leave my original research topic of climate change discourses. Based on observations, conversations, interviews, and my own participation in the Ahamb community for six months, the question I seek to answer in this thesis is:

*How is community produced on Ahamb and what are the main challenges for its persistence?*

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<sup>3</sup> The arrival of cargo ships is a popular event that attracts many onlookers.

In this, I seek to find some fundamental premises and mechanisms for the operation of Ahamb community, and place these within the context of wider socio-political developments in Vanuatu. I will show that some main mechanisms for producing community on Ahamb include comprehensive and multiple bonds of kinship relations, a morality of gifts, and the cosmologies and practices of the church. Since most Ahamb people prefer to cultivate values connected to a cooperative and unifying social logic, this seems to encompass counter logics of separation that follows from land disputes, ignorance of norms for relationships, and ideas and ideals that deprive persons from social relationships. I suggest that applying Dumont's concept of a hierarchy of values can be useful to understand this dynamic between community and schism. A dominant value in Ahamb society is to "serve God and each other". This value is much about the production and reproduction of relationships, which is a condition for the solidarity and "togetherness" that also advocates for production of the community.

When referring to "community" I mean the milieu, social group and social environment people assert membership to in the face of opposing ideas and groups (cf. Anderson 1983). I am aware that the community-term can be problematic if it evokes functionalist or organic images of a bounded entity (Curtis 2002:35). Ahamb Island is not a "complete" social entity, and there are fractures and contradictions among its inhabitants. People on Ahamb, however, often referred to community (*kommuniti*) as an idea when conceptualizing the social fellowship on the island. As *kommuniti* is used on Ahamb, it generally refers a togetherness in kinship, the church, and in the discrete island just being high enough, and far enough from surrounding villages, to form a coherent community.

As the title suggests, I argue for an agency of Ahamb people in their encounters with various phenomena. I will show that Ahamb participation in "modernity" (money, schooling and Christianity) has not brought about the same passiveness as Bruce Knaft (2002) argues has struck the Gebusi of inner Papua New Guinea. Following his return to the Gebusi twenty years after his first fieldwork, Knaft shows how Gebusi desires in 1998 seem directed towards catching fragments of outside success or to associate culturally with external lifestyles. This, he argues, has led to a conceived subordination to the outsiders associated with and mediating these desires. The path of becoming "modern" is thus paved with a particular kind of active passivity that Knaft calls "recessive agency". This negative agency he defines as "willingly pursued actions that

put actors in a position of subordination, passivity, and patient waiting for the influence or enlightenment of external authority figures” (2002: 40). In this process, the typical assumption of agency; as entailing action to actualise own desire through intervention, is somewhat reversed.

I will show that the Ahamb response to external influence is to a higher degree characterised by active negotiations. This can be seen in the opposition to the sale of Lanur Island (chapter two and five), the decision to stay on Ahamb during the tsunami warning (chapter three), and in arbitrations of capitalist ideas and ideals (chapter four). I suggest that paying attention to agency is relevant to our overarching topic of the thesis, because it can tell something about peoples’ desires, values, and actions that affect developments in the community.

### ***Ahamb Island<sup>4</sup> and Vanuatu***

Vanuatu is an island nation of the South West Pacific consisting of 82 island of volcanic origin of which 65 are inhabited. The archipelago is located at approximately 1.750 km east of northern Australia, 500 km northeast of New Caledonia, west of Fiji and south east of the Solomon Islands. Until independence in 1980, Vanuatu was known as the Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides. The population of Vanuatu as a whole was at the time of the 2009 census 234.023. Malakula, to which the small island of Ahamb belongs, is a part of Malampa province in central Vanuatu.

Ahamb Island is located in Umbeb Bay in South central Malakula. By the time of the 2009 census the island had a total of 646 inhabitants (Vanuatu National Statistics Office 2009). Included in the Ahamb social domain are also about dozen new settlements on the Malakula mainland, inhabited by people previously living on the small island<sup>5</sup>. When I refer to the Ahamb community, I mean the community of Ahamb Island. The recent mainland settlements form their own communities with village-based projects and a small church, but are connected with Ahamb through kin and the overarching Presbyterian Church session.

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<sup>4</sup> Alternative spellings include Akhamb, Akam, and Axamb. It is also known as Hampi Island.

<sup>5</sup> Most of them have moved from other reasons than fear of climate change. I will touch on this in chapter two.

Most people on Ahamb and the surrounding villages of South Malakula are subsistence farmers. There is some gardenland on Ahamb Island itself, but people mostly rely on gardens on the hilly mainland coastline. Here people grow various root crops, bananas, breadfruit and coconuts that were previously used to make copra (a practice that was resumed during my fieldwork. See chapter four). Increasing shares of people's gardens are used to grow the most important cash crop today, kava. Everyone, both male and female from the age of about 15, engages in kava cultivation. The roots are packed in bags and sent with visiting cargo-ships to Port Vila. In Vila, relatives pass them on to kava-bar owners if there is not already a direct agreement between the farmer and a customer. Kava finances school fees, participation in fundraisings, some commodities, and other necessities and small treats that cost money. To reach the mainland gardens, people either use locally built outrigger canoes of personal ownership or which belongs to the church, or they group together and charter a locally owned boat.

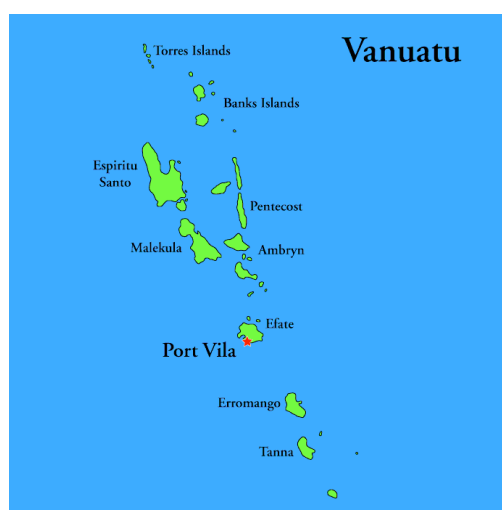
The main language spoken is Ahamb/Axam, but Vanuatu's national language Bislama is also widely used<sup>6</sup>, especially among young people, in the church, and in households where the wife is from another island. It was also with Bislama that I engaged in conversations. In the thesis, terms given in Bislama are in *italics and underlined* while terms in the Ahamb language are given in *plain italics*.

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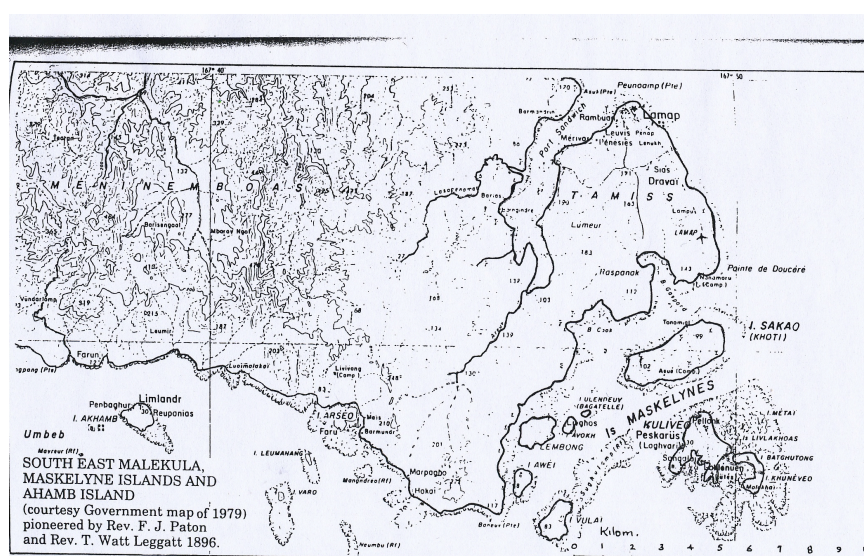
<sup>6</sup> Bislama is an English based pidgin with a vocabulary built on simplified English but with a Melanesian grammar and sound.



*Oceania. Map courtesy of Virtual Tourist ([virtualtourist.com](http://virtualtourist.com))*



*Vanuatu. Map courtesy of South Pacific Maps ([mapspacific.com](http://mapspacific.com))*



*South Malakula. Ahamb (Akhamb) in the lower left. From Miller (1989: 237, in de Lannoy 2004: 4)*

## ***Conversion and Creation of Island and Mainland nasara***

The population of Ahamb Island consists of patrilineal clan groups termed *nasara*<sup>7</sup>. As it is used in South Malakula, *nasara* has two main dimensions: That of a historical place and that of a group of people who originate in that place. In Vanuatu *nasara* typically refers to the male exclusive ceremonial (dancing) ground of the village (Curtis 2002: 91, Eriksen 2008: 28). On Ahamb it referred to the *nahamalmbro*, the stone used for sacrificial pig-killings in pre-Christian ceremonies. The stone serves as a landmark proving the connection between the territory and the patrilineage that dwells there. Ahamb villages are based on patrilineal *nasara* membership, and post-marital residence is virilocal.

The contemporary population of Ahamb Island is to a certain degree a product of conversion-processes starting in the late 1800s. The "pacificacion" of South Malakula, de Lannoy writes, did not consist in a shift in power from local leaders to colonial authorities, but mostly in migrations of refugees to Christian communities on the coast (2004: 80). Migrations were usually explained through uncontrolled outbursts of illness that was attributed to sorcery. Fights and revenge killings followed from sorcery accusations and people's sense of losing control. During this "age of terror" (cf. Rio 2002) large parts of the South Malakulan inland population was exterminated. De Lannoy argues that European contact clearly interfered with the wars, even though this is absent from local narratives where they blame themselves. The European introduction of diseases and guns, for example, which played a major role of the destructive events on the mainland, was blamed on sorcery and local violence (de Lannoy 2004: 106).

In this period, people were killing friends and relatives for the smallest indignation. People in South Malakula today "remember" this time with horror. The extensiveness of uncontrolled sorcery and killings created a quest for conversion to Christianity through the church that had settled on Ahamb. The church practiced non-tolerance of sorcery activities and other killings, and conversion to the new religion thus became a matter of survival (de Lannoy 2004: 167). The Mission offered a spiritual resistance to the destroying powers of sorcery as well as a safe material place on the small island. It became a safe haven for mainland refugees as well as for Ahamb people who engaged

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<sup>7</sup> *Nasara* is a Bislama term, but has, according to de Lannoy (2004:284) no exact vernacular equivalent in South Malakula.



in the conflicts themselves. This period in history is still important in people's collective memories, and influences contemporary relationships between families and with the church. Christianity remains strong on Ahamb today, and many I talked with cited Bible texts and parables with regards to morality and cosmology. People on the island often argued that if it had not been for the church, they would not be alive today.

Conflicts about women, pigs, and other quarrels also made people migrate to Ahamb from their original place on the mainland. Some encountered Ahamb people were on the mainland to teach or evangelise, and some followed relatives who had already gone to the small island. Ahamb was an attractive place. It was safe from sickness and enemies, and here winds even kept the mosquitos away. Most marriages in the past also took place between Ahamb people and women and men from the mainland, allowing representants of the mainland families to take refuge with maternal relatives on Ahamb (see de Lannoy 2004: 44-45). Those from the mainland who came to stay were baptised and allocated some land by the autochthonous landowners for gardens and a house.

All over Vanuatu different colonial projects from the late 1800s and onwards, including Mission and labor trade, encouraged migration from inland bush settlements to the coast. The mixing of people who often carried diverging customs (see Hviding 1996) reinforced indigenous dichotomies between coastal and bush people (Rodman 1987: 16-17). Also on Ahamb the migration of mainland people to the small island has brought about dichotomies that are still, and maybe to a larger extent than ever, used to differentiate between groups. The logic of this differentiation, which socio-political implications I will discuss in chapter two, is most significantly rooted in the concept of being *manples*.

### ***Being manples***

The Bislama term *manples* refers to the English “man of the place”, but connotations go further (cf. Eriksen 2008: 31-33). Most profoundly, a person or patrilineage is *manples* at the geographical location where the first *nasara* ancestor has his origin. One can also be *manples* at territories achieved through secondary matrilineal inheritance<sup>8</sup>. The *nasara* and to be *manples* both relieve ideas of attachment to place, and plays an

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<sup>8</sup> When there are no more men in a familyline, its land will pass to the sons of its women.

important role in social organisation. Today, the autochthonous patrilineages stay on what they regard as their original territories where their stone for pig sacrifice, the *nahamalmbro*, is found. This is their true *nasara* and the place where they are truly *manples*. Most of the non-autochthonous stays in villages close to the church on the centre of the island. In the villages, people live and perform kinship ceremonies together, such as circumcisions and *nasara* based feasts and worships. Because people are living, dwelling and performing ceremonies together in the place where they “belong”, the *nasara* members can be said to share a structural position in the Ahamb relational landscape (Eriksen 2008:29). The *nasara* are on one level politically separated units with their own chief and vice chief governing the *nasara*. At another level, however, they are politically connected through the community based Ahamb Council of Chiefs and the church.

On Ahamb there are six patrilineages that regard themselves as autochthonous (*manples*) to the island. The remaining, who are in slight majority, are regarded as having their origin in the interior of mainland South Malakula. To be *manples* or autochthonous to a territory has connotations of power to control the activities in that space (Curtis 2002). When this power was challenged in a land dispute during my fieldwork, a demonstration of who were in customary control and who were not emerged and split the community. As we will see in the next chapter, land-disputes triggers the provocation of these power-relations, and form perhaps the most important challenge to the reproduction of Ahamb community.

### ***Analytical Perspectives***

When writing the thesis I have sought out theoretical approaches that best complement the ethnographic realities I encountered on Ahamb. Most central for the thesis is Michael Scott’s model of poly- and mono-ontological cosmologies (2007) that can be seen together with Annelin Eriksen’s social forms (2008, 2009b), and Louis Dumont’s hierarchy of values (1980, 1986). Also, Victor Turner’s concept of “communitas” (1987 [1974]) is interwoven in my mediation between Scott/Eriksen and Dumont. I will use Turner’s model of the four-staged social drama to examine a major dispute that brought a temporary crisis in the community. This model that I apply in chapter five, can be a useful tool in understanding Ahamb dynamics of community and separation.

### ***Poly- and Mono-Ontologies***

I will suggest that an indigenous distinction between *nasara* groups, or more importantly the distinction between autochthonous and non-autochthonous community members, reflects what Scott (2007) terms a poly-ontological cosmology. This orientation contrasts with a mono-ontology in that it posits “two or more fundamental and independently arising categories of being” (2007: 12). The *nasara* groups have separated origin myths, totems, and traditional spirits, but it is their territorial belonging that is emphasised in land disputes that most clearly distinguishes people today. As a contrast, we will see that the church employs a mono-ontological logic that suggests common origin and an equal existence of all people in the image of God. These cosmological understandings are, together with church rites and events, advocating for cooperation, relationships, and equality, challenging the relevance of previous poly-ontological and otherwise differentiating notions.

### ***Values***

As we will see in the thesis, people tend to engage in a dynamic interplay between the poly- and mono-ontological notions. I argue that, despite diverging interests and opinions, most people seek to engage in productive relationships with each other and maintain a peaceful “togetherness”. To explain the negotiations taking place in the space between conflicts/separation/poly-ontology and peace/unity/mono-ontology I find Dumont’s term of hierarchy of values useful. Dumont defines the hierarchical relation as essentially an “encompassing of the contrary” (1986: 228). In every cultural system, Dumont argues, there is one ultimate value which is the organisational locus of society and which encompasses its counterparts (1980). I suggest that a notion of this paramount value in Ahamb society is to “serve good God and eachother”. This value, I argue, can be understood as a merging of the traditional Melanesian value of relationships, most clearly seen in Ahamb kinship structure, and the Christian God, understood as the ultimate cosmological power of creation and provision. I will argue that these two sub-values are closely intertwined and expressed through the church as the most significant communal space of the island. I will further argue that the interplay of the two values suggests a collective will to produce a united Ahamb community.

The question of the church representing a dominant cultural value on Ahamb also engages the discussion on whether or not external processes have brought and

continue to bring about change or continuity with the local ways. This has been and continues to be a debate in Melanesian anthropology, especially with regard to the implications of Christianity (Barker 2003, 2007, Robbins 2004, Eriksen 2008, 2009b, Mosko 2010). My general argument in this question is that an indigenous control of the conversion process and of running the church (and other colonial institutions) has made some central pre-Christian elements persist on Ahamb. This includes “the relationship” as a dominant value. I also suggest that an indigenous influence on the establishment of foreign cultural elements has helped the agency of Ahamb people persist, to a higher degree than among the Gebusi (Knauff 2002).

### ***A Note on Concepts***

It is important to clarify that when I use the term “autochthonous” I refer to those who regard themselves as autochthonous. On Ahamb this includes the *nasara* of Mrensa, Malianbor, Rotavu, Robanias, Lamburbaghor, and Marirau. I have chosen to not elaborate too much on internal controversies on these statuses as I do not find them decisive for the objective of this thesis<sup>9</sup>.

Throughout the thesis the term *kastom* will emerge in various contexts. *Kastom* refers to traditional cultural practices, and has been well explored in Melanesian anthropology. It has often been examined with reference to its instrumental connotations as ideologies and activities formulated to empower indigenous traditions and practices (Keesing 1989, Keesing & Tonkinson 1982). Traditional cultural elements have had a revival in Vanuatu and have been used politically both in the rally for independence and in post-colonial contexts. Even though appearing as a political symbol and sometimes “invention” of tradition, *kastom* on Ahamb is very much a part of “culture” (cf. Akin 2004). The term is used when referring to indigenous practices that have persisted since the pre-colonial times, and ideas from national *kastom* discourse are appropriated into local social practice.

When saying “the church”, I refer to the Presbyterian Church as the main denomination on the island in which more than 90% of the population are members. More than 90% of the island population are members here. I acknowledge that this conceptualisation

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<sup>9</sup> For more thorough accounts on these matters see de Lannoy (2004).

can exclude the two other churches on the island; the Seventh Day Adventists (SDA) and Bible Teaching Ministries (BTM), and also Neal Thomas Ministries (NTM) established by Ahamb people in the mainland village Harun. In everyday life, however, people tend to cooperate and emphasise a fellowship as Christians, rather than the different denominations. In contexts where I refer to the church as an institution for communicating Christian moral values and the Christian God, it will thus be with reference to all denomination on the island.

## **Methodology**

The fieldwork was carried out from January to July 2010. January was spent in Port Vila to plan the fieldwork and get my research permit and visa. I also spent about one week in the northern Banks islands in January before jumping on the cargoship to Ahamb in early February. I had one fieldbreak of three weeks in Port Vila in April/May. At the end of June I left Ahamb for another three weeks in Vila before returning to Norway.

On Ahamb I was adopted into two families. That of fieldworker Hedrick Peter and Niely, and that of *jif* Herold and Jelen who were my closest neighbours on the island. I was quickly ascribed a position in the local kinship system, and tried to act according to *kastom* (see chapter two). Fieldworker Hedrick and myself put up a "research plan" for the first couple of months where I was to visit every *nasara* for two days first to talk about their *histri* (genealogies, origin story etc.). The research-plan helped me set off the fieldwork, as these meetings were just as much a way for me to get to know people and let them get to know me.

Before arriving on Ahamb, I read parts of Jean de Lannoy's PhD thesis from South Malakula (2004), and knew that there could be disputes and contrasting views on *histri* between groups. Having newly finished a methodology course at university, I knew that to reach Stewart's epistemic value of veracity in anthropological research, I had to talk with every group on Ahamb, not only my newly achieved "kin" to "search for disconfirming observations" (1998: 21-22). Wanting to be a neutral observer and create trust among people, I usually insisted on doing independent interviews with people or groups. It made me feel bad when I realised how this could have been potentially

insulting to those who wanted to come with me and that I could have appeared stubborn at times. As I learned more about the disputes, however, I felt confident that my decision was the most appropriate.

As most of these sessions evolved, conversations turned to all different kind of topics in addition to the fixed topic of *histri*. As a general tendency, I think the decision to concentrate on topics that randomly occurred, or that people expressed interest in, helped me identify better with the actual life situation on the island than if I had stuck to the topic I had prepared (Fangen 2004: 132). It can also have reduced imposing on people my own notions of what was important (cf. Hutchinson 1996: 49). The introductory sessions with the different *nasara*, that ended up lasting for two months, involved meals that were organised by the women and kava at night organised by the men. Much of my research data and many relationships with people in the community evolved through these occasions. The sessions also generated later invitations for meals, kava, and other activities, and at the end of my research period I felt that I, at least to some extent, had a relationship with everyone on the island.

The main method of research was participant observation. As was mentioned in the introductory story, I had ambitious goals of engaging in local activities of every kind. Because culture is said to be not so much “informative” as it is “performative”, I was inspired by Wikan who argues that the ethnographer not only must witness a variety of performances, but more fundamentally, needs to experience culture personally (Wikan 1991, in Stewart 1998: 25). I quickly learned my limitations, however. Hunting for wild pigs in the mainland hills proved to be both too dangerous and physically demanding. I could not paddle a canoe very well, and as I am afraid of fish I was useless at any kind of fishing. The best I could do to fulfill my goals of participation was to engage in the rhythm of daily life and try to join people in regular activities and to places they went. This included worships and other church activities, meetings, visiting relatives, and eating and living as people did on the island. In addition to the participatory observation, I also employed semi-structured and informal unstructured interviews to follow up on occurring topics. While in Port Vila I occasionally met up with town residing Ahamb people to do interviews and to learn about their interaction with the island and life in town.

In retrospect, one can always regret not having talked to more people in order to allow for alternative perspectives on different cases. Particularly in the big dispute about Lanur Island described in chapter two and five. The families I was adopted into were both of autochthonous *nasara*. The majority of my time on Ahamb was spent in the villages of my adoptive families, and I also spent the most time talking with the people of these villages/*nasara*. My understanding of the separation along the autochthonous/non-autochthonous divide, for example, may therefore mostly reflect the views of the autochthonous. As we will see in chapter two and five, the demonstration of the power attributed to being *manples* is nevertheless affecting the remaining groups of the society. Therefore, I suggest that my representations of the dispute are adequate for the objective of the thesis.

A clear limitation of my work is that I interacted mainly with men. In most of the deeper conversations I had with women, men were also present. I found it difficult to engage too much with women independently as I was a single man and afraid to generate jealousy and discontent among other men. There is therefore inevitably a flare of “maleness” of my field experience and my data. I did have many conversations also with women, however, and I have tried to reflect views that I understand as shared among a wider section of the population. Including women I talked with and got to know.

### ***Some Ethical Reflections***

During fieldwork I spent much time working with genealogies and felt troubled about “taking” genealogies without returning them. Genealogies are regarded as “secret” for its group and are together with other identifying elements used to claim land (see Curtis 2002: 32). I drew genealogies to get an overview of relations between people, and my intention was never to “judge” the correctness of any kind of *histri* I was presented. Afraid of fuelling potential disputes with my work, I discussed the issue of genealogies with my supervisor, some Ahamb chiefs, church leaders, and other community members I trusted wanted the best for the community. After an evaluation of pros and cons, I

finally decided to return the genealogies I had drawn to the respective families who had given them to me<sup>10</sup>.

During fieldwork, I was always open about my role as an anthropologist, or a “student of *kastom* and culture” as I phrased it. People also knew that I was going to write a thesis about some topics of Ahamb cultural life for my master’s degree at university. During my first week on the island I put up posters in every village about who I was, what I was interested in, and what I was going to do. I often asked if it was ok that I wrote down stories or points from conversations, and in most cases this was accepted without question. I often carried my notebook openly when going to places and visiting people as a reminder of the purpose of my stay. I also wanted to practice an “open note taking” to engage openness around my work and for inviting people to participate in the research (Hutchinson 1996: 44). It was an ethical challenge for me, however, that I did not always inform people what I wrote down. This feeling was especially prevalent when I started to write the thesis. To a greater extent than when in the field, and certainly before the fieldwork, I now felt the structural power difference between me, as an anthropologist, and the people represented in my data. I learned to know the actors in my material as persons and friends, not merely objects for scientific research. A thought that persisted in my thoughts was: “with what right can I represent and analyse these persons and their life”? During the process of writing, however, I have found support in thinking that the goal of anthropological research is to use the obtained knowledge to explain social phenomena and generate potentially transferable insights (Stewart 1998: 59). And this does not necessarily imply to extradite persons, as I was most uncomfortable with. To protect my informants while retaining the analytical points, I have used anonymisation where I have found this necessary. I have also left out contested details about places and persons.

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<sup>10</sup> See Kolshus (2011) for a further discussion on the problematic issue of repatriating genealogies and other ethnographic accounts.



## ***Thesis structure***

In chapter two I will discuss the main challenges for the production of community on Ahamb. I will argue that contemporary political processes, often connected to control of land, play a central role in generating arguments about separate categories of island inhabitants. Disputes emerging from these processes pose a major challenge for the production of community on the island. The dispute on Lanur Island that occurred during my fieldwork will serve as a main example of this. In the last third of the chapter I will introduce the Ahamb exogamous marriage practice. In this section I will show that differentiated categories of people can also bring people together through the structures and practices of kinship.

In chapter three I will discuss the role of Christianity and the church in challenging logics and notions of differentiation and separation. I will argue that church rites form an everyday basis for ontological and cosmological ideas that suggest equality, togetherness, and cooperation.

In Chapter four we will see how gift exchange makes up an important part of sociality production on Ahamb. By discussing empirical examples where the ideals of togetherness and social relationships are challenged, I argue that the relationship as a central value to Ahamb society is revealed. We will also see that cultural values and practices of the non-ritual context are based on similar principles as in the ritual church context.

Chapter five begins with a return to the Lanur-dispute and an analysis of the dispute's process towards an eventual reintegration of the divided parties. I will argue that Dumont's concept of value hierarchies is useful in trying to understand how Ahamb people seem to resume production of community despite obstacles in the process.

At the end I include a chapter of some concluding remarks.

## 2 Differentiation and Separation

It is not every man Ahamb who is a man blong Ahamb<sup>11</sup>

*Phele, among others*

In this chapter I will explore what I see as the main challenges to the production of community on Ahamb. This includes land-disputes and breaching of norms attributed to status of being manples. Disputes involve a differentiation and separation of groups and persons that threatens the idea of a unified community. The differentiation is usually on the level of the nasara or found in the dichotomy between autochthonous and non-autochthonous islanders. I argue that this essentialisation of belonging and identity is not decisively rooted in notions of primordial initial states, even though it reflects kastom social organisation. Much of its relevance today has rather emerged in context of the new meaning of land in the Vanuatu post-independence context (see Hviding 1993). A new material value of land, prompted by National land reforms triggers people to claim ownership for present and future security in residence, food, monetary income, and to control the developments of local life worlds. Also the Land Tribunal used for judging land-ownership emphasises features that distinguishes the claiming nasara from each other. The Ahamb-case can exemplify how “European discovery of Vanuatu initiated changes laden with consequences for indigenous views of land as a symbol and as a resource” (Rodman 1987: 13). The last part of the chapter will focus on how the categorisation of groups can nevertheless serve as a condition for production of kinship and relationships across the previous separation.

### ***Nasara and a Poly-Ontological Cosmology***

As we saw in the introduction, the term nasara is both used about the designate kin group and the original place or territory of that group. The close connection between kin group and land is expressed through the concept of being manples. Today there are six nasara who regard themselves as manples to Ahamb. A majority of nasara groups consist of descendents from mainland migrants, and are regarded as manples at different

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<sup>11</sup> Man blong Ahamb translates to “man belonging to Ahamb”, in the sense of being manples at that place.

territories in the interior of South Malakula. The *nasara* carry a range of features that differentiate them from each other. Every *nasara* has its exclusive story about coming into being, separate identity symbols or totems<sup>12</sup>, spirits, and claim a unique territorial belonging.

The origin myth usually involves the first ancestor of the *nasara* emerging in social and physical isolation. The totem of the *nasara* is called a *haindram* or *kastom aedentiti*. This can be a rock, a leaf, a plant, or a fruit that links to the origin myth or another *kastom* story. The *haindram* serves to symbolise patrilineal belonging in various ceremonies such as boys' circumcision and marriages. When time for marriage, the groom's *nasara* "buys out" the woman by giving her family a piece of their *haindram*. The woman always takes the *haindram* of her father's *nasara* to be replanted by her new home at the place of her husband. The *haindram* also has its daily use in the gardens. When a person harvests from a garden belonging to a different *nasara*, he or she leaves a piece of his or her *nasara*'s *haindram* as a notice, for example at the trunk of a banana tree if taking bananas.

All *nasara* also have their exclusive spirit(s) called the *narmaj* (*nasara devel*). Its work is to protect and assists the members of the patrilineage and their land. The *narmaj* takes part of many success stories involving fertility and power to overcome challenges. Sacrifice to traditional spirits is now prohibited by the church, but most claim that their *narmaj* is still alive. In most recent stories involving a *narmaj*, however, people usually play a passive role. The *narmaj* can for example appear in dreams where they bring news about troubled *nasara* members on other islands. This usually happens several days before the news arrive through other information channels. Even though the *narmaj* appears as a good companion, people presented it as inferior to the power of the Christian God. *Kastom* spirits are also believed to play a part in sorcery, and sacrifice to any traditional spirit to drive away the greater cosmological power of the Christian God. Therefore most people expressed no particular dissent about abandoning worships of their *narmaj*.

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<sup>12</sup> If using W. H. R Rivers's definition of totemism, that of "the connection of a species of animal or plant... with a definite social group of the community, and typically an exogamous group or clan (Rivers 1914: 2: 75, in Scott 2007: 16)

These distinguishing features that separate one *nasara* from another, makes Ahamb cosmology appear as a poly-ontology as described by Scott (2007). As we saw in the introduction, a poly-ontological cosmology “posits two or more fundamental and independently arising categories of being” (2007: 12). I suggest that the notions of discrete “categories of being” on Ahamb are most clearly expressed by separate origin stories, the separate *narmaj*, and forbidden *tambu* areas in which only members of the *nasara* are allowed. I will elaborate more on the contexts in which poly-ontological notions are expressed in the following sections.

The exceptional position of Christianity on Ahamb has contributed to a decline in importance of most of these distinguishing features. Territory that follows from kinship belonging, however, remains as a steady marker of distinction. This, I argue is because of the exceptional relevance of owning and controlling land for rural ni-Vanuatu. Land is the source of subsistence, cash to pay for education, contributions to the church, paying for transportation, building materials, and much more. The importance of land for people in South Malakula is reflected in the common expression *yumi kakai from graon nomo* (we live only from the land). Land disputes represent the most important context in which antagonistic notions of a poly-ontology occur. Land is usually claimed on the behalf of *nasara* groups, and claiming land in the South Malakula Land Tribunal involves the claimant presenting exclusive *nasara* features that “proves” its belonging to the land. I argue that the number of land disputes in South Malakula, and especially on Ahamb, should be seen in context of the new material value of land brought about by National post-independence politics. Before showing how Ahamb people are emplaced in these developments, I will give a brief introduction to Vanuatu politics of land.

### ***Politics of Land in Vanuatu***

During the French-British Condominium, land in Vanuatu was alienated from the indigenous landowners. It was the loss of land that released the political consciousness leading to the rise of Vanuatu’s independence movements and finally Independence on 30<sup>th</sup> July 1980. The Constitution created with Independence stated that all lost or alienated land was to be returned to the rightful *kastom* owners (Daley 2009, see Van Trease 1987). In the 1970s, however, Vanuatu (then the New Hebrides) had already been turned into an offshore finance centre or “tax haven” by the British colonial

authorities. Potential freedom from taxes was cited by the Government and private companies as a reason for capital heavy foreigners to invest and settle in Vanuatu (Rawlings 1999: 38-39). Daley (2009) argues that Independence did not only bring about a turn to indigenous interests in land, but also a series of laws that protected European and foreign interests from the colonial times. Whilst some foreign planters were driven from the land they occupied, the majority were granted long-term leases, and within the Port Vila municipal area existing land titles were protected by an urban leasehold system. In post-independence Vanuatu, the politico-economical development of land law has thus taken a somewhat ambiguous character: On one side it favours traditional landowners through insisting by law that all land in Vanuatu shall belong to indigenous and customary landowners. But reforms were also introduced to make Vanuatu develop economically by attracting investors. This appears through the continuing promotion of Vanuatu as a tax haven and through accommodating an investor-friendly land lease system. The lease system involves lease of land to be granted for 75 years for a single payment. Daley argues that even though land through these contracts is not sold per se, the lease will in practice have the same implications as a sale for the ni-Vanuatu landowner. If the customary owners should wish to reclaim the land at the end of the lease they are able to do this but must compensate the leaseholder for any improvements to the land. The financial cost of this, however, is beyond reach for most ni-Vanuatu. Thus, the lease system, whilst not technically or legally being synonymous with “selling” land, it is in practice facilitating the same forms of alienation (Daley 2009). In writing about these long-term “land leases” as they occur in the Ahamb context I will use the term “sales”. For most people in South Malakula this is the practical outcome, and *salem aot land* (selling out land) is the term most frequently used about the leases.

### ***Vanuatu Land Boom***

Today, the foreign controlled real-estate sector is fuelling a land boom resulting in about 90 per cent of coastal land on the island of Efate, where Port Vila is located, being alienated (Daley 2009). A search on the websites of real estate agents in Port Vila confirms developers moving further afield to the islands of Espiritu Santo, Epi, and Tanna (Island Property 2011, First National Real Estate 2011). Land developers have recently appeared also in South Malakula, and people in the region could confirm both

completed and attempted sales of land. The sale of Bagatelle, a small island in the South East is a well-known example. On Ahamb it was referred to as a prime example of the morality of commercial exchange between foreigners and ni-Vanuatu: The local *kastom* owners had sold the island for a very low price to the investor, not realizing its commercial value. The foreign buyer then resold it to another foreigner for many times the price (Kristine Sunde Fauske, personal communication 28<sup>th</sup> March 2011). The sale had caused a prohibition of fishing or trespassing in the land areas. This provoked local villagers as well as people on Ahamb. I also heard about two islands in the Southeastern Maskelyne Islands being sold to a foreigner without the legitimate *kastom* owner being settled. Some years ago a non-autochthonous man from Ahamb had tried to sell Varo Island a few kilometres east of Ahamb<sup>13</sup>. The sale was eventually put on hold because the Land Tribunal found another (autochthonous) *nasara* to be the rightful *kastom* owner. The most recent land sale was that of Lanur Island, an uninhabited island few kilometres east of Ahamb. The sale and the circumstances around it caused a major social crisis on Ahamb at the end of my fieldwork.

### ***Lanur Island. Emerging Unrest***

A few weeks into my fieldwork I discussed land with some men of a neighbouring village. During the session I was told that there were tendencies of a dispute regarding the recent sale of Lanur to a foreign investor who wanted to build a tourist resort. The sale was especially contested as it had proceeded without a proper settlement of rightful *kastom* landowners. Apparently, more than ten parties claimed customary rights to pieces of the island. The men told me that at one stage some people from Ahamb had chased the investor and his company from the island. Now, the parties were just waiting for a Land Tribunal to be set up to find the rightful landowner.

When returning to Ahamb a couple of months later from a fieldbreak in Port Vila, the Lanur-case had become a major conflict in the area. A Land Tribunal was about to take place, but far from everyone was satisfied with how the process of settling owners had proceeded.

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<sup>13</sup> During my time in Vanuatu, the man spent much time in Port Vila having new meetings with foreigner investors interested in buying the island.

## ***Unfolding Division***

The sale of Lanur had been organised by a man whom I will call Robert, originating from a mainland *nasara* but born and raised on Ahamb. According to the rumours, the sale was arranged through an internet-advertisement, and the sales sum was high. The dispute was claimed to be rooted in the establishment of a political group a few years back in which Robert had a leading role. One objective of the group was to set up a land tribunal in Farun village on the mainland, using a land tenure system called the *Bahriran*. In the *Bahriran* system, owner-rights follow from the interior and down to the sea. According to others on Ahamb, *kastom* landownership in South Malakula is based on scattered territories claimed through an account of how your patriline connect to the territory.

Supporters of the latter system argued that it had already been agreed upon by many knowledgeable men of *kastom* in the district, and was even practiced by the South Malakula Council of Chiefs. Implementation of the *Bahriran* system would imply a total remake of traditional boundaries. This would not only have consequences for landownership on Lanur, but also for Ahamb Island and areas on the mainland presently under control of Ahamb families.

To oppose the further proceedings in the Lanur-case, a coalition of men from the autochthonous Ahamb *nasara* Marirau, Rotavu, Mrensa, and Malianbor was formed. The opposition accused the non-autochthonous chiefs sitting in the Ahamb Council of Chiefs of working against the interests of the autochthonous. The council's chairman (whom I will call Andrew), they claimed, had failed in getting the Ahamb Land Tribunal formally up and running. A well-functioning island-based Land Tribunal would help to judge land ownership quickly and minimise doubts making people put out claims leading to disputes and division. Instead of engaging the Ahamb Land Tribunal or the district tribunal of South Malakula, rumours had it that *jif* Andrew had been bribed by the landseller to set up a committee of judges from other parts of Malakula to use the *Bahriran* system in Farun.

The autochthonous coalition prepared a letter signed by autochthonous chiefs where they demanded that the sitting Council of Chiefs would step down. The group felt that the sitting council was working against them, and now the time was right to regain control and re-establish previous roles and positions. This implied that the

autochthonous should again be respected as the hosts of the island and the mainlanders were to stay with them. This shift would suggest a greater emphasis on the connection between kinship and place, and thus manifest the distinctions between native/non-native and host/guest, having hierarchical connotations.

Some men of the autochthonous opposition expressed to me that they for many years had been forced to fight against certain persons who tried to claim and sell their land. The worst was that they had to defend themselves against people who had come to stay on their land, in a safe environment, when struggling to survive with sickness and killings on the mainland. These were people, they said, that the autochthonous had let grow food in their gardens, and who had been given rights to go fishing in their reefs. But when the man Ahamb went hunting for wild pigs and wild bullocks in their forests on the mainland there was gossip and reprimands (*toktok*). When asking one of the leading persons of the opposition whether they really had the right to drive out the sitting Council of Chiefs, he argued: "Yes, we took them to the island. If they had been left in the bush, they would have been dead".

As the land case proceeded, the autochthonous coalition arranged private nightly meetings where an alternative Council of Chiefs was set up to replace the sitting one. The idea was that all seats of the new council should be filled only with chiefs from the autochthonous Ahamb *nasara*. They understood there to be no other solution. The control over Ahamb Island had to return to those who "come from Ahamb", "the true man Ahamb" as they termed it. As is typical for any event on Ahamb, the men started and ended their meetings with a prayer, asking God for forgiveness and support if their claims were right.

### ***The Dispute becomes Public***

The autochthonous group also worked to hinder the Lanur sale itself and the appointment of the *Bahriran* system. A relative residing in Vila worked hard to convince authorities that the proceedings of the land sale was illegal and opposed the *kastom* land tenure practice of the area. Eventually, he succeeded to postpone the court case in Farun and news about the halt in the proceedings was announced on National radio. Anyone who attempted to continue with the case would be subject to enormous fines or even imprisoning. Shortly after the news was announced, reports came in that



those who had interest in the ongoing proceedings were furious. The case divided the community. Even though there was a small group of men who fronted the dispute, everyone on the island was affected and somewhat ended up on one side. The coalition continued with their nightly meetings, and they found a date for publicly announcing their discontent and claims to take over the chief's council.

After a Monday morning worship, a church Elder<sup>14</sup> announced that everyone had to go to the public dining hall where community meetings are held. Church worships the previous week had included prayers addressing the challenges the dispute caused to the community. On our way home from the worship, I talked with Afel, a man of thirty, who was tired of going to these meetings. There were only a few men who engaged in disputes, he said, but still everyone had to go and was affected in one way or another. Many did not even know what the present case was all about, he complained.

Waiting for the sound of the horn that calls people to meetings, I strolled around in my own and the neighbouring village and asked whether or not people would go to the meeting. Many responded reluctantly *bae mi go yet* (I will go, eventually). People rarely hurry to be in time for meetings on Ahamb, but this morning they lagged more than usually. When the horn sounded for the second time this morning, most people were still in their houses. Some started eating breakfast, others sat and chatted, while others again just relaxed or occupied themselves with small tasks around the house.

When I arrived at the dining hall there were only a few men inside while some youngsters were hanging out outside. Slowly people started to fill up on benches and on the floor along the walls. Some were sitting with their necks bowed, and the atmosphere was quiet and tense. When the meeting begun I estimated there to be fifty to seventy persons present. Many more were walking around outside, looking in through the windows of the large bamboo and thatch building. Two Elders from the Presbyterian Church, John Alsen of the non-autochthonous Lohornbuas and Tom Hanzel of the autochthonous Mrensa, announced that they would lead the meeting from a table up front. The two declared that there were three points to discuss at the meeting. In addition they would take up a wish by a group that the Council of Chiefs should resign and be replaced by chiefs from only autochthonous *nasara*.

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<sup>14</sup> Church leadership on Ahamb consists of a Pastor and several Elders and Deacons.

The two Elders announced the first point: “The Council of Chiefs fails in making an Ahamb Land Tribunal work”. Such an island court had been established, it was explained, but the council had not been using it. Instead, they had turned to different Land Tribunals and external methods for tracing landowners.

The second point was phrased: ”All strangers who came to stay on our land do not recognise us, man Ahamb, and they are (also) criticizing us”.

The third point was that people did not respect landownership already settled in court. Rather, they try to claim it again. In the argument it was emphasised that this made landowners busy settling cases all the time. Also, the landowners worried because court-cases cost money and one was never free from accusations and (counter) land-claims.

The additional point was the claim for a new Council of Chiefs and also an interest in reviving the previous hi-chief position on the island. The hi-chief was a title first installed by the first missionary on Ahamb, and would have the last word in all cases concerning life on Ahamb. Eventually, the title was first given to Haindrivleo of the autochthonous *nasara* Rotavu as a return for allocating land to the first church on the island. The hi-chief position should follow the bloodline of the first titleholder, the autochthonous coalition argued, and should therefore belong to a *man Rotavu*.

So far we have seen that land is a highly political issue on Ahamb and has the potential for conflict and dividing people in ontological categories of “Ahamb people” (*man Ahamb*) or “mainland people” (*man menlen*). The dispute that evolved ultimately had to do with a breach of social norms or values that characterises the relationship between those who are *manples* and others who dwell in their space. Curtis argues that stories of origin that connect persons to land typically works to legitimate and perpetuate certain these norms concerning social relations (2002: 196). The story about how Ahamb was first settled can serve as a foundational vehicle in this matter. I will now present the origin story of the Ahamb as told by Peter Tom, a senior man of the autochthonous Malianbor, and known to be of the most knowledgeable of *kastom* on the island.

### ***The Beginning. Two Twins and the Nahamb***

All *nasara* (from Ahamb) come from two men. Benbagor was the name of the first village. The two came from the sea (*solwota*), from a clamshell. Very big like this

(indicating 1,5 meter). It was two boys Rörngal and Rörmbang or Vetbong. They were the first men of the island. The two brothers arrived on the beach. "Where should we live?" they asked. They decided to go separate ways around the island. After walking they met at one place. This was Benbagor. They did not want to stay at a rocky place (the south side) because it was too noisy. The beach (on the north side) was more quiet<sup>15</sup>. They were the first men of the island. There were no women. They did not know what women were. Women came from the mainland. The village (where the women came from) had the *kastom* name Tanomas. The two (man and woman who stayed there) got two girls. One day their pig had run away towards the water. They had put a necklace around the pig made from *navivang*, a fruit that they now dance with at the Arts festival in Port Vila. The pig went inside a cave, Lhronangrei, and there it gave birth to its baby inside the cave. The *kastom* name of the village is Lhronangrei. Inside the cave the pig gave birth to two piglets. The mother and father had two daughters already and all four of them followed the pig. They tried to get the pig out. They built a small village there and never returned to their hill home. They had many pigs there now, so it was hard work to go back to where they came from. In the bright sun in the morning they saw two persons walkabout on the island and smoke coming up. There were only two (of them), always. The two daughters asked their father: "many people live here on the island, but only two on that island. We are not married yet, and we can see two men on the island". Their father said "ok, so I will make a special boat for you". The body of the boat was made of wood from the banana tree and the floor of bamboo. It was a magic man, a *Barlaur*, a very clever man who made this special boat. He could make anything: make rain come, sun come, wind and all other things.

The men had never seen or known anything about women. The father of the women sang a *kastom* song and put the boat on the river close to the village. The wind came after the *kastom* song and carried the boat along. Maybe they would be killed and maybe not by the people out there, but "you go and look" he said.

The girls reached Ahamb. They walked along the beach. The boys stayed at the *nakamal* (mens' house) of Benbagor where they worked their bow and arrow. One of the sisters said: I am the firstborn, I will go first. The woman hid behind a tree, Borau that is dead now, because the sea has taken it out already. The sea has dug the place already. "It is two men like daddy", the women thought. They (the boys) were naked, they did not have *nambas* (penis sheaths). The boys talked a language that was a little bit different, but they understood a little bit of what they said. The girls had eaten their last meal (*las kakai*) with their mother and father, put on nice

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<sup>15</sup> De Lannoy (2004:46-59) analyses different versions of the origin myth given by groups and families. For my objective of the thesis I do not find a broader discussion on divergences necessary. The major differences I found were some senior men of the autochthonous Robanias who told a similar story except that they referred to their ancestor Rörmbang as being the *bigfalla broda* (first born brother). They also added that Rörmbang took the largest piece of land on Ahamb on the East side where one can hear noise from the waves and wind. Rörngal (or Vetbong) chose the quiet place on the island's West side where his ancestors of the *nasara* Mrensa and Malianbor reside.

clothes, put on a kastom necklace. They did not know if it was their last meal, if they were to die... The firstborn went first, out from the Borau. The boy had never seen anything like this, the necklace on the chest, something swelling around the chest (her breasts), it looked like an evil spirit! He ran to his brother: "We have lived here a long time, we have never seen something like this, it is like an animal or an evil spirit". The brothers ran inside the nakamal and hid. Afterwards, the two came out and asked the daughter: "Are you an evil spirit or an animal?"

The daughter said: "I am not an evil spirit, I am like you a human being, but not one man like you". "We call us women, you call you men. You are like our father on the mainland". The boys said, "oh, we have not seen anything like you...". The daughters said: "Oh, we have seen smoke here, and we wanted to see if you are men or women and we wanted to stay here with you". The women made nambas for the men and said: "you are not to walk about naked, we want to make nambas for you". The first night they had sex. The girls showed them, because the men did not know how, and they got children. The father on the mainland thought: "They did not come back, they must have come to stay on the small island now, because we saw four people walkabout there. They did not die. They will get families and live on the island (*Bambae oli got famele mo liv long aelen ia*)".

Benbagor was the first nasara. Mrensa, Marvar, Maliabor, Rotavu or Romland, Robanias and Marirau grew out of the two twins and their wives<sup>16</sup>. All men Ahamb are native Benbagor. They speak the same language and descend from them two.

*Told by Peter Tom, Malianbor, February 14<sup>th</sup> 2010*

### ***Myth, Relationships and Control of Spaces***

While the story can be said to provide a "blueprint for being manples" (Curtis 2002:170) and therefore have hierarchical connotations to it, the myth also suggests the autochthonous' awareness of their dependency on mainland people for women and reproduction. Apart from the differentiating and hierarchical implications, it also reveals an idea of the way out of solitude and stagnation being through relationships with the outside world. In the Ahamb context this translates to the mainland and their women. The story thus sets the condition for marriage exchanges with mainland families who also provide access to land on the mainland necessary for making gardens (de Lannoy

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<sup>16</sup> Marvar is regarded as extinct, even though one man was said to convert from Mrensa. The autochthonous status of Marirau is contested, as we saw in the introduction, and their neighbour Robanias is their main opponent. De Lannoy (2004:70) suggest that Marirau's opponents believe the Marirau people were misled to believe that they descend from the two twins by a man of Malianbor. This was because he meant Marirau deserved full land-owning status as a result of their ancestor Hailongbel's role in converting Ahamb to Christianity (see chapter 3).

2004: 71). Women (or mainlanders) thus did not come empty handed to Ahamb. Rather, they brought with them gifts of reproduction, such as women and access to land, and new knowledge and practice (for example learning the twins to dress). Thus, women and other mainlanders have in their movements played a crucial role in facilitating “roads” to produce society on Ahamb (Eriksen 2008: 53-55).

The story of first human settlement on Ahamb can thus suggest the community of descendants of the twins and mainlanders as a “natural” state. Simultaneously, the relationship involves certain hierarchical connotations in who are the “original” settlers. To be *manples* in Vanuatu, Curtis argues, implies an authority to control the actions and pace of that space and having certain inalienable rights over people who are not (2002: 179). This authority is further enforced by a discursive control over narratives and spaces. The autochthonous patrilineages on Ahamb have *tambu* areas on their respective *nasara* that appear spiritually and physically dangerous to those who trespass without having the right affiliation. This generally involves belonging to the particular *nasara* of that place. Even women who are married into the *nasara*, the *vilaq*, are not allowed in this *tambu* space. If trespassing without the appropriate permit from a *nasara* member, the ancestral spirits of the place may cause sickness to the trespasser. This sickness is not to be relieved before accomplishing the appropriate *kastom* payment of a white fowl to the *nasara* elders. I suggest that the *tambu* areas reserved for autochthonous patrilineages that have their original place on the island can be seen as an explicit expression of who are in control of Ahamb land and socio-political space.

The non-autochthonous on Ahamb are, by virtue of not owning the land they are staying on, not entirely free to do what they want. This is seen, for example, in contexts of cash generating businesses and the success of non-autochthonous community members in this domain. Awaiting the FIFA World Cup in June 2010, Kelvin who was operating one of the most successful retail stores on the island, had plans of making a TV station for people to watch the matches. The World Cup had been a major topic of conversation for many months already. Men engaged themselves with team updates through the radio and discussing what teams to support, while women complained in a joking matter that it was “that time again”, when their men were hardly to be seen and forgot all about their families. A few weeks before the cup was to begin, it seemed like Kelvin’s plans

about the TV station had dwindled. The reason was rumoured to be some *toktok* about Kelvin being demanded to pay rent to the landowner for hosting the project<sup>17</sup>.

A similar incident was a dispute at the end of the 1990s rising from the successful store of some brothers of a non-autochthonous *nasara*. The business sold petrol, retail goods, and bought kava from people for resale in Vila. As the business grew, the brothers were approached by a man of the landowner who wanted them to pay a monthly rent of 10.000VT for operating business on the land. The storeowners meant that the rent was too high and declined. This led to *toktok* and swearing, and one from the landowners expressed that “it was not their place, and not their land” and rent should be paid. Since Ahamb was not “their place” the men were asked to look out their own place and do business there. The families of the businessmen had already moved once within the island because of dispute with another landowner letting them know it was not their place. The end of the case was that the businessmen and their families moved out to settle on the mainland. Here they established the now major mainland village of Renaur that in 2010 contained nine households and its own church under the Ahamb Presbytery. The two examples add to my argument that commercial development plays a big role in triggering land disputes and the production of different categories Ahamb people with their defined rights. In chapter four I will argue that it is not necessarily the material gain in business operation that sets off disputes and controversies. Rather, any involvement with money has the potential to “lift” people out of norms governing social relationships and thus challenge notions of a social order.

### ***“Neo-origin myths” and a “Gift of Life”***

The Ahamb origin story can be said to legitimate certain norms governing social relations on the island. Some *nasara* are asserted as the original to the island while others are newcomers eventually belongs somewhere else. I suggest that stories about migrations to Ahamb during the time of conversion can carry similar connotations. The migration stories take the character of “neo-origin myths” as they represent the coming into being of a “new life”, both as Christians and in a new place. The stories also

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<sup>17</sup> I was only told this by third parties to the case. Unfortunately I was unable to get a version from Kelvin or the landowner.

explain the birth of contemporary Ahamb community. As with many other mainland *nasara*, Jim Knox and his brother Sacky of Varilo *nasara*, did not have much knowledge about their patrilineage's history from the mainland (*blong taem long bus*). They were, however, able to present a more thorough account of their migration and new "coming into being" on Ahamb:

We come from Barningehalilamb. It is a two hours walk from the sea and to the hills (on the mainland). There are three *nasara* inside of Barningehalilamb that is also called Lemab: Those are Varilo, Venrechu, and Varvulu. Before in the bush of Lemab sickness came. Diarrhea... *posen* (sorcery) spoiled everyone. Masinge, the son of Aiavlul was born there. Aiavlul died and Masingne married there in Lemab with Litong from Virang. The sickness came and separated all people there. People went to all different places. Masingne and his wife Liton went to and settled at Lembong. The sickness came there too and they had to look for a new place. They came to stay in Uhrkon. Masingne came to Uhrkon with his son Sohnahor who was born in Lembong. They sent a message (*tok*) to the island (Ahamb) and two *angkel* (mother's brother) of Masingne, William of Rotavu and Mario of Malianbor<sup>18</sup>. They came for Masingne and Sohnahor (and took them to the Ahamb).

While these stories explain the close bonds between actors in the often dramatic migrations processes, they also establish notions of roles and positions. Earlier in this chapter we saw how the autochthonous coalition in the Lanur dispute expressed disappointment with how newcomers failed to acknowledge the "gift" of being invited to live on the island. The accommodating of migrants somewhat took the character of a "gift of life" (see Rio 2007:219-220) that is difficult to reciprocate in full and therefore has hierarchical implications (Mauss 1990 [1950]: 42).

A hierarchy in relations resulting from accommodation of mainlanders during the "age of terror" was manifested on New Years Eve of 2009 when a big community feast was arranged on Ahamb. For some time there had been a discourse on the island about an inevitable relocation to the mainland. There were many reasons for this, including a lack of land and resources to meet the population growth, environmental hazards such as coastal erosion and tsunamis, and disputes and social unrest from simply too many

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<sup>18</sup> The people of Rotavu told me it was William who came to bring the two to the island while Malianbor told me it was Mario. However, Jim Knox did not want to take a stance on this, and commented that such a settlement "was their business". Families take great pride in their ancestors' deeds in the conversion process, and versions of histories like this have political and moral meaning as well as proposing special relationship between families.

people living together in a small space. By the end of 2009, chiefs and church leaders of the island had formally opened up for whoever wanted to move to the mainland to do so. Many expressed grief that the community appeared to dissolve. Others appeared comfortable about moving to the mainland as it would entail more space to do various projects and there would be less conflict regarding land rights. The big feast at New Year's was organised in case it was the last big community meal. At the feast the mainland *nasara* who had come to stay on Ahamb gave live pigs to their respective autochthonous hosts. The giving of pigs carries high symbolic value in Vanuatu. Possession of pigs is a most vivid representation of status, wealth, and power in *kastom*, and the killing of a pig is generally the ultimate sign of something reciprocated and settled (Rio 2007: 187).

Most of the mainlanders who migrated to Ahamb arrived either alone or with very few family members. Escaping the disease and killings, the migrants married on Ahamb and grew large families that make up the non-autochthonous *nasara* on the island today. The accommodation of mainlanders gave the autochthonous a role in producing or reproducing the families that arrived. The "gift" of accommodating mainland-refugees in a safe environment can be understood to place the recipient in the position of being a product of the giver, and therefore interiorise him or her as internal to the giver (Rio 2007: 223). The pig-giving this day represented gratitude and acknowledgement of the previous gift of the recipient. Because the initial gift involved production of life, it takes the character of a "gift of life". The giving of pigs on New Year's, even though they carry high symbolic value, appear merely as a temporal and partial counter-gift of acknowledgement in context of this life-producing gift. To reciprocate in full will probably demand an equally important and significant return "gift of life". Many mainland people talked about how they would give the autochthonous who had looked after them a place to stay on the mainland when they eventually have to migrate. Until this transaction of counter-gift occurs, however, it seems that a notion of hierarchy deriving from both an un-reciprocated "gift of life" and the *manples* status persist.



## ***Poly-Ontology and the Revival of Kastom***

As we saw in the beginning of this chapter the categorisation of people that suggests for a poly-ontological cosmology on Ahamb is found in the framework of *kastom*. As we will see in the next chapter, the church appears as an opposition to the differentiation of people into separate categories. Some contemporary processes, however, seems to reinvest new meaning to poly-ontological notions. Land disputes as we have seen is one, and the current interest to revive parts of lost *kastom* on Ahamb as elsewhere in Melanesia is another (see Hviding & Rio 2011 (forthcoming), Keesing 1989).

A monumental step in finding back to lost *kastom* practices took place in 2006 when Ahamb was chosen by the VKS to host the National Sand Drawing Festival<sup>19</sup>. For this special occasion, there was a desire among people on Ahamb to see the stunning *kastom* dance of the island. The dance had not been performed for more than a hundred years, but Peter Tom remembered some central elements of the dance told by his father Tom Vanbir. The *kastom* dance was a great success at the festival, and I even heard about a man who had died on the spot while watching because he was so glad to see the proud dance revived. Only men from the autochthonous *nasara* were allowed to dance, as it was their *kastom*. Difference in *kastom* was also an argument put forth by Jim Knox and Sacky in telling me where they regarded to be their home:

The bush. That is where our place is. This is where we have our *evidens* (evidence)<sup>20</sup>, our customary site. With the revival of *kastom*... we have a different *kastom* and identity than the (people of the) island. It makes us feel our belonging to the bush, and that it was the gospel that made us come here and that we are here. Our roots are somewhere else.

While I was on Ahamb, the *nasara* of Jim Knox and Sacky, Varilo, were in a process of reviving their traditional local language called *Manri*. The language originates in the mainland areas where they regard their original place to be. During my fieldwork *Manri* was used in meetings of the *nasara* and attempted taught to the children. Youngsters, however, were more eager to use Bislama, which many elders criticised as symptomatic

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<sup>19</sup> Sand drawing is a rich ritual and artistic tradition of Vanuatu. Because the practice tended to disappear, VKS engaged an action plan for safeguarding the sand drawing tradition. This project, sponsored by UNESCO, led to the National Sand Drawing Festival of which the first was arranged in 2004.

<sup>20</sup> Refers in this context to elements connecting the patrilineage to land, such as genealogies, the *nahamalmbro* (stone for pig sacrifice), and *narmaj* (*nasara* spirit).

for the loss of *kastom* in Vanuatu today. Another recent case of revival was the wish by the autochthonous coalition during the Lanur dispute to re-establish the hi-chief position (that was in fact installed by a missionary). This position we saw could only go to a man of Rotavu *nasara*. There was also a wish by the coalition to find a *kastom* chief to deal with customary issues such as land tenure. This position, they argued, could only be filled by a man of Mrensa or Malianbor *nasara*. This was ultimately because the highest ranked man in the pre-Christian male graded society, the ultimate ceremonial context and expression of *kastom*, was their ancestor.

## ***Unity across Separation***

### ***Three generational exogamous marriage***

For a community of a poly-ontological cosmology to unite, Scott suggests that actors must create unifying productive relations across the various pre-existing categories of being (Scott 2007: 18, 318). The most fundamental level of which these relations are initiated on Ahamb is the three generational patrilineal exogamous marriage practice which produces a broad network of affinal kinship relations. The Ahamb model for marriage involves a woman of *nasara* A needing three generations of female descendents marrying out to other *nasara* before her matriline is allowed to marry back to *nasara* A.

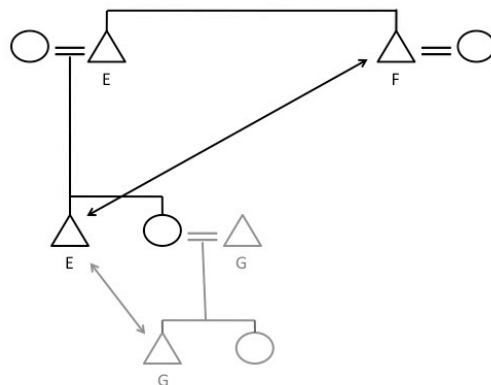


follow the "way of *kastom*", however, and in order to escape the density of relatives many now find their spouse outside of South Malakula<sup>21</sup>.

I suggest that the exogamous marriages are ontologically significant because they transform the relationship between strangers or opponents to a conceived oneness of us, or *yumi*<sup>22</sup> (Scott 2007: 141). When a married couple has children, the tie between the two families is further strengthened through the traditionally strong relationship between the nephew (ZS)/niece (ZD) and their mother's brother(s) (MB) called *angkel* or *papa*. On Ahamb, your father's sister's husband is also regarded as your *angkel* and this serves to further extend the relationships between affinal relations of different *nasara* groups.

### ***Angkel and Nephew***

The relationship is nurtured through reciprocal ritual roles and duties throughout the lifetime of the ZS and MB. The reason why the niece is not involved in this exchange is probably that she will eventually marry out and join another *nasara*. Thus, she will in practice leave the production of relationships between the patrilineages E and F (see figure). Instead, in effect of becoming a mother herself, she becomes a mediator of relationships between the *nasara* of her father and brothers (F) and that of her husband (G).



<sup>21</sup> In the 1980 and/or 1990s (accounts wary) there was a marriage committee on Ahamb appointed by the Presbyterian Church. In addition to approve an appropriate distance in kin, the committee made sure the couple had access to gardens, a toilet, kitchen equipment and other necessities.

<sup>22</sup> The Bislama word *yumi* "translates to the inclusive plural "us". I heard the expression *yumi nomo* (just us) a number of times during fieldwork when manifesting community between affinal (and other) relatives. One context for its expression could be "lay off those formal manners, it is *yumi nomo*".

On Ahamb the circumcision of boys at the age of eleven to fourteen is the starting point of the close relationship between the MB and ZS. The boy's family is traditionally responsible of presenting one pig to every MB of their son, but today other items such as cow, mats and fabric are also used. The circumcision is a one-week ritual where boys are isolated from the outside world inside of a bamboo-house built for the occasion. The MB provides the recently adopted aspirin for local anaesthetic, fabric, and other materials his ZS needs for the event. He also makes sure the boy is comfortable at all times during the week.

When boys are seventeen to twenty years old their facial hair is shaved for the first time. The shaving takes a ritual form commonly termed *pullum raesa* (literally: pulling the razor). The MBs are performing the shaving and provide their ZS with some new clothes, such as a shirt and trousers. The ZS' family gives the MBs other gifts in return. If the boy and his family have the means, all MBs will be contacted to take part in the shaving. This includes the boy's mother's cousin brothers. Otherwise, only the closest; those who share parents with the mother are contacted. Most important are the *bigfalla angel* who are the senior MBs born prior to the ego's mother.

When ready to marry the MB helps out his ZS (the groom) with various tasks. As a groom you have the right to ask your *angel* for help with whatever you need. If the groom's father and brothers, who are generally responsible for helping to raise the bride-price do not succeed in this, for example, the groom can ask his *angel* for help.

The close relationship between the MB and his ZS continues until the eventual death of the MB. In this situation, all ZS of the departed are responsible for digging his grave that is placed either by the home of the deceased or the common graveyard of his *nasara*<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> Leaders in the Presbyterian Church are entombed at a small graveyard on the church area.

## ***Tok Ple and Tambu***

Other affinal relationships that work socially integrating are the *tambu* relationships and *tok ple* or joking relationships. Both of these have a strong and mutual character (see Kolshus 2007: 64-69).

The *tok ple* or joking relationship involves the ego's MB's children and the ego's father's sister's children. The ego makes jokes with and at the expense of these persons. Jokes are often accompanied by outbursts of howling laughter from everyone in the area having the same relationship. The hilarious character of this relationship carries notions of friendship, but also respect.

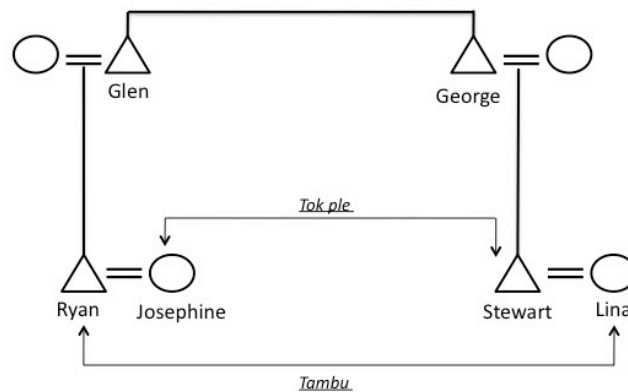
*Tambu* refers to forbidden or sacred, and to a person who is your *tambu* you must show uttermost respect. These relationships include that between the ego and his/her parents in law (especially of the opposite sex), the ego and all men the spouse regard as brothers (including all cousin brothers), and between a man and his "small brothers" (brothers born after the ego and cousin brothers whose father is born after the ego's father). The practical rules for action between *tambu* relations include stepping out of the road when meeting an in-law, staying at the opposite end of a space in which the *tambu* is also located, not calling the name of the *tambu* person nor mentioning his or her body parts (especially if related to the head or inside of the body). As we will now see, the *tambu*-relationship can be said to carry important connotations of social integration in that the respect-laden relation in practice "prohibits" intrusive activities and conflict.

## ***Court case. Offending a Tambu***

During my time on Ahamb I got to observe three *nasara*-based court cases where a *tambu* had been offended. Court-cases of this level of jurisdiction take place in the village of the offender and are organised by the chiefs of the respective *nasara*. All members of the *nasara* are expected to show up and invited to share their viewpoints. On Ahamb there is typically no clear boundary between public and private, and self and other. Most issues, from feuds and sickness to personal troubles and breach of *kastom* taboos, are all regarded as common social concerns that should be dealt with at some communal level (Rio 2007: 133). These communal ways of dealing with issues, Rio stresses, does not mean that people do not have personal integrity or do not act in their

own right, but is rather a way of thinking about how relationships between people work, and how one is involved in these relationships oneself (2007: 133).

The court I will describe was between a man whom I will call Ryan, a man in his early forties, and his cousin brother Stewart. The cause of the incident had been arguments between the two leading to Ryan walking to Stewart's house breaking his family's toilet. It became clear to me during the court proceedings that the objections to this action was not the breaking of the expensive porcelain toilet few could afford, but rather the abuse and breach of Ryan's *tambu* relation to Stewart's wife whom I call Lina.



Since Ryan's father Glen is born prior to Stewart's father George, as we see in the figure, Ryan becomes Stewart's "big brother" or *wowa*. The *wowa* enjoy special respect as the most senior of his generation of brothers and is therefore the leader of this group. In a group of brothers/cousin brothers the *wowa* position includes any brother born prior to another. The *wowa* has the right to ask anything from his "small brothers". His leading position also entails special obligations towards his "small brothers". This includes a *tambu* relation to their wives, whom he terms *vilaq*. All "small brothers", however, enjoy a *tok ple* relationship with the wives of their *wowa* and calls them by the more neutral *tawi*.

Because the house of Stewart is also the house of his wife Lina, it automatically becomes *tambu* for Ryan. He is not allowed to enter the home without an invitation. Ryan was fined by the chief of his *nasara* for breaking into a *tambu* area and also for doing action there, something that is strictly forbidden.



*Symbolic giving of kava in regret for breaking the rules of a tambu relationship*

Later that night most members of the nasara gathered for a reconciliation ceremony where Ryan handed over the fine to the offended and to the chiefs on behalf of his nasara. As is regarded to be kastom, Ryan first gave his speech of regret (sori toktok). In this, the newly resigned chief after more than a decade in service explained that when he was a chief, his title used to protect him. If he was tempted to do something not good, he thought about his position as a leader and role model and realised he could not do it. But now, Satan had affected his thoughts and made him proceed, and for this he was very sorry. Ryan then gave a kava root to Stewart and they embraced each other. Then he gave a kava root to Lisa, his vilaq and tambu that he had offended. Stewart also gave a short reply speech. An Elder of the Presbyterian Church belonging to the two men's nasara closed the ceremony by talking about the importance of these reconciliation ceremonies in straightening out sore matters. Because the final judgement can come anytime, he said, we have to settle our sins. The Elder then lead a communal prayer, and made a final comment on how fortunate we were for having kastom to settle matters like this. After all, he said, kastom and the church are concurring rather than contradictory systems because they both strive for peace.

Most men then grouped together to drink kava which is always present in kastom ceremonies. Women, younger children, church leaders and others who abstain from the drink sat their course home, while male relatives from around the island started to arrive to drink a few shells and chat (stori).



In this chapter I have presented some processes leading to dispute, differentiation, and separation on Ahamb. We have seen that notions of differentiation are already present in a *kastom* poly-ontological framework. I have argued, however, that these notions are reinvested with vitality especially in the occurrence of land disputes which frequency and intensity is fuelled by a new value of land. The last sections have showed us, however, that notions of “separation” in terms of *nasara* belonging does not mean that social integration cannot happen. Rather, the Ahamb *kastom* model for exogamous marriages presupposes these initial notions of difference. And exogamous marriages generate a vast web of affinal relationships that are assured through conducts of interaction that I argue are socially integrating. In the next two chapters I will continue to explore mechanisms of sociality and community production on Ahamb. First, I will examine the domain of the church, before resuming to the domain of kinship, norms and values governing social relationships in chapter four.

### 3 Christianity and the Church

In the years before independence not only *kastom* but also Christianity served as a potentially unifying factor across the different linguistic, cultural, and political borders of Vanuatu. Politicians and leaders in this period were to a significant extent characterised by an emphasis on communality through Christian values (Eriksen 2009a: 179). At independence, attempts were made to tie Christianity and *kastom* together. The preamble to the Vanuatu Constitution, for example, states that the Constitution is “founded on traditional Melanesian values, faith in God and Christian principles”. The “Father of Independence” and first Prime Minister of Vanuatu Father Walter Lini declared: “God and custom must be the sail and steering paddle of our canoe” (Forsyth 2009: 11). When the Constitution was drawn up in 1980 the national slogan of “Long God yumi stanap” (in God we stand) was also launched. As Vanuatu became a nation of Christians, Ahamb too became an island of Christians, where Christianity now serves as the islanders’ prominent and encompassing identity (see Tonkinson 1982).

The Presbyterian Church was the first church to establish itself on Ahamb. It arrived in the 1890s and remained monopolistic for about a century before other denominations started to arrive. These include The Neil Thomas Ministries (NTM) arriving in 1997, Seventh Day Adventist Church (SDA) in 1999, and the Bible Teaching Ministries (BTM) in 2005. More than 90% of people on Ahamb are members of the Presbyterian Church. I got the impression that the leading role of the Presbyterian Church in the community is to an extent acknowledged by members of the other congregations even though there are disagreements on teaching and arrangement.

In this chapter I will discuss the various ways in which Christianity and the church produces sociality and community on Ahamb. As an introduction I will present the story about how Christianity settled on Ahamb, its introduction of new cosmological message, and discuss how the church came to such a central position on the island.

## ***Christianity settles on Ahamb***

The story of the introduction of Christianity on Ahamb takes the character of an origin story itself. Different persons tended to emphasise parts of the conversion where their own kin members were involved. The persons involved in establishing Christianity, and those who later worked in spreading the Christian message to the mainland areas, figure today as cultural heroes for their kin. David Hailongbel, who received the name Sam when baptised, is regarded as the man who brought Christianity to the island. The present Presbyterian Church building is also carrying his name. The version of the introduction story I will now present was told me by Pedro, a man of Rotavu related to Hailongbel through his father Frank's sister's marriage with Malian, Hailongbel's son.

The two, Hailongbel and Heindrivleo, went to Queensland to work on the plantations and took the gospel with them to Ahamb<sup>24</sup>. In Queensland, Hailongbel chose to go the "right way", to Sunday school. Heindrivleo chose boxing. Robanias and Rotavu did not want the light to shine on the small island. Hailongbel was Heindrivleo's "big brother" and he brought a missionary man, Mr. Lagget to the island. They built a church on this area (close to where Pedro lives). Hailongbel broke a coconut, gave his woman one part and the two ate. The elders on the island (*olfalla long aelan*) (referring to his ancestors of Rotavu and Robanias) saw it and they cursed because the man and woman were eating together. In the heathen time, in our *kastom* of before, this was *tabu* (forbidden). Heindrivleo went to Marvar (the *nasara* of his MB) and said: "Hey, they are about to kill my brother". This led the men of Marvar to come with axes and knives to fight the men of Rotavu and Robanias. Marvar and Heindrivleo asked Rotavu and Robanias: "Do you want fight"? They did not want this. Heindrivleo was big and strong, and the men from Marvar arouse. They were afraid. So it was peace.

One of the most commonly mentioned breaks Christianisation brought with heathen time was the abandonment of separate cooking fires for (ranked) men and women<sup>25</sup>. When Hailongbel, himself a man of rank, broke the coconut and shared it with his wife, it signalled a break with traditional ways and the beginning of a new system (de Lannoy 2004: 142). Many people I spoke to regarded the separate cooking fires as the ultimate symbol of the differentiation and separation of the past as opposed to notions of unity in the church. A few months prior to my arrival, there was a re-fusion of the long time separated Robanias and Lamburbaghor *nasara* that reflected notions of a heathen past of rivalry and the Christian age as one of unity. Several generations back a dispute had

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<sup>24</sup> Some talked about the two going more or less voluntarily while others claimed they were kidnapped by labour traders ("blackbirding").

<sup>25</sup> This is common in the whole region (see Eriksen 2008, Kolshus 2007).

caused Robanias to fission. The dispute led a Robanias man to cover his body with the ashes of the *haindram* of the *nasara*, a plant called *nias*, and washed it off as is the straight *kastom* way of "becoming clean of" one's *nasara*. The man then established a new *nasara* named Lamburbaghor with a village on the eastern side of Robanias. Some tension had persisted between Robanias and Lamburbaghor regarding seniority and land. But in 2009 the two parties arranged a reconciliation ceremony to end their disputes. Carl of Lamburbaghor explained the decision:

It is the end of time that we have now come to as the Bible is talking about. The last days shall be division between brothers ... but now it is time to straighten and sorting things out. As it is preached in the church: if we die and have not straightened everything first ... all differences from before you must straight out ... you must be one.

Carl, a former politician, and now a successful boat operator and businessman, continued referring to the well-worn Bible present in the otherwise empty thatch house we were sitting in with some other men Lamburbaghor:

Mark 13 .. talking about wars in the world, earthquakes everywhere. Famine as it is in Africa. It is like the first signs a mother feels before giving birth. Now, we tune in the radio and hear about everything everywhere ... it shows that prophecies start happen. Stealing, stealing the wife of another man, rubbish talk .. (Now) man must be holy and clean ... to prove the talk of the Bible (*proven toktok blong Baebol*).

The reconciliation of Robanias and Lamburbaghor can suggest that Christianity has triggered a change in the cosmological orientation on Ahamb. From one of poly-ontology emphasising categorical difference in separate stories of origin and practices of the male graded society, to one of mono-ontology emphasising unity and a common origin in God. This argument will be developed further throughout the chapter. If a turn in cosmological orientation suggests that Christianity implied drastic breaks with the past, we will see that this is not necessarily so. Rather, the new religion featured a continuation of already existing beliefs and practices, while some of the most important breaks can be interpreted as “answers” to local desires and needs.

## ***Confirming the New Religion***

In the story about Christianity's introduction we saw some ambiguity and ambivalence in how the community responded. According to Jack Taylor (2010) this was typical in Vanuatu during the early colonial period. Christianity brought with it peace but also a danger of cultural loss (2010: 429). After the dramatic introduction, however, it seems that the resistance to Christianity dwindled and the new religion came to be firmly established on the island. I will suggest three main reasons for why Christianity came to this position. Firstly, the agent of conversion on Ahamb was indigenous rather than colonial (de Lannoy 2004, see Taylor 2010: 429). The Presbyterian missionaries and district agents had their base in Lamap on the South East coast of Malakula, and only visited other villages and small islands such as Ahamb when on tour. As there was no permanent missionary presence on Ahamb, the further conversion in the district was done locally and left Ahamb agents in control of much of the process. Presbyterians missionaries in Melanesia more often than others enrolled local assistants in teaching and mission. A number of people from Ahamb were delegated authority as teachers both on Ahamb and other places in South Malakula. A reason for the engagement of locals was that teachers from the southern islands of Vanuatu such as Aneityum where conversions had begun sixty years earlier, refused to work in heathen areas further north for low salaries, and went on strike in 1901 (Miller 1989: 203, in de Lannoy 2004: 140). This opened up for a rise in indigenous Christian leaders of South Malakula and a development of a more independent indigenous understanding of the Christian message. The opposite was the case in nearby Lamap, where the relatively intense presence of expatriate Catholic missionaries left little room for local interpretations. This led to emerging conflicts and greater distance between the church and people in Lamap (de Lannoy 2004: 113-116, 136-137, 157).

A second reason for Christianity's strong confirmation on Ahamb can be attributed to the illness, sorcery, and hostility that emerged around the time of conversion. This made people feel they lacked control over powers they experienced as destructive. The Church and Christianity then became an alternative life saving peace and prosperity-generating force in its opposition to these powers. As I will show later in the chapter and the next, sorcery continues to be an element considered in people's relations and everyday interaction. This is one reason why the church is still invested with vitality, as

it is regarded to be the prime medium through which sorcery is battled (see Tonkinson 1981: 250-254, White 1991: 110-111).

The third point is that Christianity concurs with elements already existing in *kastom* cosmologies and practice, making the breach with previous systems less dramatic. The works of the Christian God, for example, is quite similar to the traditional *narmaj*. Before, people prayed to the *narmaj* for help in everything from luck in fishing to infertility. In addition to providing for the *nasara* members it also served to protect them at all times. These are also the ways the Christian God is understood to work. Indigenous notions of a continuum between the pre-Christian world and Christianity was present in how Christianity was not only talked about as breaching with the “darkness” of the heathen time, but also as calling back to “the true core” of good, ancestral *kastom*. Elements of *kastom* discouraged today, such as sorcery used to hurt people, split cooking fires, and cannibalism, took the character of human mistakes. In some contexts Christianity thus appears more as a continuation or reformation than a displacement of *kastom*. As we will see, there are several examples in Ahamb society of how Christian interpretations and churchly activities can be recognised as continuations of traditional cultural forms rather than denials of them (see Scott 207:303-306).

### ***Church as a Space for Transparency***

People who go to church are not hiding anything. Those who believe that God is true go to church. You can tell all your secrets to God. If you do not go (to church)... I don't know what it is.

*Peter Tom. Kastom expert and church member*

Christianity on Ahamb stands for the whole community and brings people of different groups together in ritual occasions as well as in work and meetings. Especially Sunday worships attract most people on the island. Even though Ahamb is a small island, people do not interact much across villages on a daily basis. Karen Brison suggests that meetings in small-scale societies may be one of very few contexts where the community can demonstrate its existence as a group, and concern themselves with other people's affairs (1992: 22). In attending church worship, meetings, or committees related to the church, all people on Ahamb meet in an arena essentially communal and not only

confined to members of a village or *nasara*. In church the person shares him- or herself with the larger community, and attendance reflects a form of transparency in persons and social relations.

Being the highlight of any worship, the communal prayer termed “Mother’s Prayer” blurs the distinction between person, group, and community through an internalisation of common concerns to the life of individuals in the congregation. The essence of this special prayer is that anyone can approach a church leader before or during the worship with concerns they want the congregation to pray for. When reaching the time for the “Mothers Prayer” in service, the leader of the worship announces the prayer points he has received. Before the prayer begin, it is introduced with the worship leader saying “As God has promised in John 14:14: ‘If you ask anything in my name, I will do it’”. Everyone then begins loud and powerful prayers over the given topics that typically include cases of illness, travels, curbing sorcery, good governance by leaders, and various community-related topics. Based on this, going to church on Ahamb can be seen as more than just seeking salvation. It also involves adjusting to the social norm of the community, sharing yourself to the social world of which you are a part, and expressing an acceptance of your place in a larger community.

### ***Communitywork and Fundraisings. Transforming the Individual to Communal***

Work related to church groups and committees makes up a substantial part of many adults’ daily life. All community committees such as the Health committee responsible for operating the island’s health clinic are affiliated with the Presbyterian Church. Most community messages are announced in worship and shorter public meetings are held outside the Presbyterian Church after Sunday service. In short, when there is need for organised communal effort, the Presbyterian Church is used as a medium. Shortly after my arrival on Ahamb, I became engaged with the locals constructing a new secondary school area at Bñgavs on the mainland. Everyone fit to work on Ahamb and some from Farun engaged with the project for about three months<sup>26</sup>. The school-committee initiated

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<sup>26</sup> The school was previously placed on Ahamb. The tsunami warnings generated from the Samoa earthquake in September 2009 made the Government insinuate the flat Ahamb Island to be unsuitable for

the project, and the Presbyterian Church provided a framework for organizing the work. The volunteer work carried out by the locals was impressive. Without contributions or even the knowledge of the government or other external parties, the school area consisting of twentythree buildings was ready less than three months after starting to clear the area previously covered by dense tropical jungle.

Tom Hanzel and Markvin, among others, argued that community work was especially strong on Ahamb because people there got so much “love”. On the church’s role in the Bñgavs school project they argued that: “it was work for God. God is number one. Every work we do here on the island, it is of the church (*blong joj*)”. If they had not participated, they said they would “not feel good” (*no harem gud*). To not take part signalises that you “direct your life from your own self-interest”. But “if you got love (*lav i stap*), then you go”.

In organizing community work chiefs, church leaders, and committees invoke ideals of Christian unity as the principles for cooperation. This makes the work extend the single patrilineage or kin ethic of cooperation (Scott 2007: 261). As we will also see in chapter four, Ahamb moral values are strongly connected to communality and relationships, as is compatible with Christian values of love for one another and for God. On Ahamb, as elsewhere in Vanuatu (see Eriksen 2008), projects linked to the church receive greater support by people because they know it is meant to benefit the community and not achieve personal glory. There are many contexts on Ahamb in which churchly and non-ritual values and practices blend or take a similar form. Arranging fundraisings, for example, are appropriate methods for achieving necessary cash while simultaneously engage in production of relationships. Both church organisations and families who struggle to pay school fees or in other ways are short of funds, arrange communal fundraisings. These events usually involve persons or families contributing garden produce, fish, pig, cow-meat, or bought foods such as rice that are used to make a big meal, often several *laplap* (a traditional pudding), that are sold by piece. The profit is kept by the organizer of the fundraising or given to the church. Just as important as the

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further hostage of the school. Also marginal space and some conflicts with nearby villages suggested challenges for further operation of the secondary school on the island. Anxious to see it shut down and moved elsewhere, the locals took action and organised building of the new school area on the mainland.



money, however, is the bringing of people together for the sharing of food and engagement for a common cause. In both community work and fundraisings, individuals and households are, by virtue of their contribution, opening up relations between each other and pulled into a larger community (Eriksen 2008: 104).



*People from Ahamb and Farun preparing the new area of the secondary school at Bñgavs*



*A fundraising organised to support school fees for Nil Tom and Telaya's daughter studying in secondary school*

## ***God, Sociality, and Gift Reciprocity***

One of the first groups of beings with which men had to enter into contract, and who, by definition, were there to make a contract with them, were above all the spirits of both the dead and of the gods. Indeed, it is they who are the true owners of the things and possessions of this world. With them it was most necessary to exchange, and with them it was most dangerous not to exchange. Yet, conversely, it was with them it was easiest and safest to exchange.

*Mauss (1990 [1950]:16)*

Reciprocity figures in many accounts of indigenous forms of Christianities developed in rural Melanesian societies (Gregory 1980, Schwimmer 1973). The activities of both community work and fundraisings can be said to involve gift reciprocity in the form of mutual engagement to achieve common or family-based goals. All members belonging to the Ahamb Presbyterian session are expected to give thanksgivings and tithes (a tenth of their earnings and produce) to the church<sup>27</sup>. I suggest these practices reveal a network of relationships where also God Himself appears. Both as an agent in reciprocal gift relations with His followers, and as a third party that mediates transactions between community members (see Rio 2007).

Every Sunday worship in the Presbyterian Church include a thanksgiving section where people give offerings in the form of money or garden produce to be sold by the church. When persons offer a thanksgiving, it is usually accompanied with a note of gratitude to God and the church for help and support. In this context, as in other domains of Ahamb society that I will discuss in chapter four, the wealthier a person is the more he or she is generally expected to give. Carl for example, operating a transport service and retail store, gave as much as 1000 vatu<sup>28</sup> one Sunday to thank for his new boat engine and the generator he received with the cargo ship the previous day. A normal thanksgiving, in contrast, is on of one hundred to 500 vatu. By offering this unusually large amount of money, I suggest that Carl acknowledged his belonging to the community that benefits from his gift to the church. Such a visible acknowledgement of relationships is especially important for business-operators as we will see in chapter four. Because they have the potential to accumulate money that are easy to keep for oneself, there are special expectations for them to re-distribute their surplus to produce relationships. If this does not happen, the businessman or any other person who fails to nourish

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<sup>27</sup> The Ahamb Presbyterian Church is locally financed through thanksgivings, fundraisings, and tithes, and operated by voluntary community work.

<sup>28</sup> In May 2011, 100 Vatu equalled €0,78 and \$1,11.

relationships, is accused of having *hae tingting* (think highly of oneself), and is ultimately put in a vulnerable position for sorcery attacks (see Rio 2002).

The thanksgiving offerings appear as gifts to nourish both relationships with community members and with God who is regarded as the supreme cosmological power of growth, prosperity and protection. Hedrick, a man of about forty and the father of four, explained the thanksgiving-elements of the quarterly tithe as follows:

Because all fruit and food is created by God ... He makes it grow, you do nothing. It is someone who makes it grow. You cut the leaves and clean. But the growing, that it becomes big, it happens automatically! We want to say thanks to Papa God and give maybe ten fruits of orange as a thank you. The Deacon or an Elder of church sells it and the profit is given to the work of the church. To widows, disabled, orphans or organisations who are doing work for them.

The notion of engaging in a reciprocal relationship with God, and with other persons by using God or the church as a third party mediator, appeared in several contexts during my time on Ahamb. The Christian God is for example often believed to work through people. I have already argued that people saw important similarities between the traditional *narmaj* spirit and the Christian God. The two differs, however, in how and to whom they answer prayers. A common conception was that while the *narmaj* provided instantly (for example when praying before fishing, the fish would come at once), God does not always provide as explicitly, but has "His ways" (*wes blong Hem*). "God's ways" of providing often involves working through other people. As a man explained it to me: "If you pray before fishing but does not catch any fish, a neighbour is suddenly coming with a pig leg for you and you will nevertheless be able to eat".

During fieldwork I was myself placed in the socially expressed webs of godly provision. I had suffered many weeks from an infected wound on my foot, when at one point people started to include me in the "Mother's Prayer" and other prayers. On my way to the health clinic one day to check the wound, I met two women from Eastern Malakula who had come to visit family and mourn over the death of an Ahamb relative. They called me over when they saw me limping as I passed them. The women asked to see the wound and affirmed the assumptions of others that it looked inflicted by *kastom* (sorcery). As they knew well *kastom* medicine (treatment with local plants) regarded as the only appropriate treatment of *kastom* illness, they offered to help. The health clinic orderly had recommended me to start a cure with antibiotics the same day, and I had

tried other *kastom* medicine before without success. This made me doubtful, but I was nevertheless persuaded into giving it a try together with the antibiotics. The women prepared the medicine from the ashes of a straw that was spread on the infected wound. After a few days, it was clear that my wound was healing, and many, including myself, expressed happiness about the progress. In the days and weeks that followed, many talked about how God had heard the prayers and "found His way" through the two women who helped me with their medicine.

The understanding of God as working through other people corresponds with central Christian values of sharing and providing for your neighbour. A belief in the work of God can thus both pursue and consolidate the central role of social relations in Ahamb society. In this, Christianity and the Christian God differ from the understood operation of the *narmaj*. Even though generous in its providings, the *narmaj* did take up the same "totalising" position as the Christian God. It only provided through one-to-one relations between worshiper and the spirit, and was also exclusive to members of the *nasara* the *narmaj* belonged to. The exclusive operation of the *narmaj*, only working for one defined category of people, supports the poly-ontological character of *kastom*. Access to the providings of the Christian God, in contrast, is equally distributed among all people. Also, as likely as prayers are responded to directly, they may be fulfilled through another person who, as the ego, is regarded as a part of God's image. This understanding of God's work supports the mono-ontological character of Christianity.

The Christian God on Ahamb can be seen as representing not only a power of great provisions, but also a powerful initiator of sociality that typically characterises powerful men in Melanesian societies. According to Rio, these power men have the capacity to take up a "totalising position, a position that makes them able to put together their community as a whole while still also being a part of their community" (2007: 30). Because God is believed to facilitate sociality through constant provisions, and encompass any community challenge from sorcery to environmental hazards, as we will see shortly, He becomes the ultimate Melanesian "big man" (Sahlins 1963). In fact, *Big man* was a popular reference to God in Ahamb daily conversation<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup>If talking about predictions for the future, for example, a popular expression was "it is only *Big man* who knows" or "if *Big man* wants, then it will come through" (*Hemi stap long Big man, nomo*).

The notions of God's power and the significance of engaging in reciprocal relationships with Him reciprocal partner appeared a day in February when we received a tsunami warning from the radio. The circumstances of the event also expressed the dangers of not engaging in such a relationship.

### ***Tsunami warning 28<sup>th</sup> February 2010***

At the initial stage of my fieldwork many conversations I had with people involved thoughts on the coastal erosion of Ahamb's northeastern side. Many said they were not too anxious about it, and arguments often related to how God was protecting the island because prayers were so strong. An early Sunday morning in February we were awakened by radio reports about an earthquake of 8.8 on the moment magnitude scale outside of Chile. The earthquake had triggered a potentially devastating tsunami<sup>30</sup>, and a tsunami warning was issued for Vanuatu. Through the radio the Government appealed to people to evacuate to higher grounds. For people on Ahamb this would mean the hills of the mainland where many had their gardens.

During these turbulent morning hours many chose to stay on Ahamb where they organised prayers and waited for updates on the radio. In between updated posts from the Meteorology Department (*Meteo*), we could hear the comments and appeals of a firm male voice in Radio Vanuatu. My adoptive parents, *jif* Herold and Jelen, and other relatives in Turak village wanted me to evacuate to the mainland. When we ate our breakfast, significantly faster than usual, I had already packed my backpack with necessities to live a few days in their temporary thatch house on top of a mainland hill.

After eating we went to the village table by the beach where people usually sit to chat (*stori*) and catch fresh wind. A group of men in the village were gathered and silently listened to the radio and discussed quietly the situation. My brother Alfred told me he did not want to go to the mainland yet. Our cousin brother Albert, a preacher at the island's SDA church, expressed that: "God has got love for us and will not hurt us. But at the second coming of Jesus Christ, no one will be spared, and it is our time now to show ourselves worthy". As we sat listening to the radio, people were gathering on the

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<sup>30</sup> The tsunami actually devastated several coastal towns in south central Chile, leaving hundreds of people dead and displacing about 1.5 million people. It also caused minor damage in southern California and Japan.

beach at Benbaghor about a hundred meters away. Some carried baskets for going to the mainland and some boats were transporting people from villages along the northern beach strip. The radio voice passed on the latest news from Meteo that the estimated time of the tsunami hitting Vanuatu was postponed with one hour. By the beach at the outskirts of Turak, a group of women were sitting on a worn out canoe while men were gathered by the nabanga (banyan tree) next to them. I walked over to them and found the atmosphere in their group surprisingly merry. Most of them, except Ericksen who was sitting there with his two children, were joking and laughing as if they were hanging out any normal day. The men were also listening to radio and told me the situation was not dangerous and they would not evacuate. Taurant announced that Meteo had now postponed the tsunami by another hour. In addition, someone argued, the strongest wave had already passed us without being discernible. Hedrick, who owned the radio, argued that the distance from Chile and America where the tsunami was generated to Vanuatu was too great for a big tsunami to hit us. Everyone did not agree on this, but were on the opinion that since the earthquake happened at 4.30PM Vanuatu time, it was unlikely that a tsunami would reach us in Vanuatu at 9-11AM. A stringband song was then played on the radio and I was encouraged to sing the tenor (*smol vois*) and dance as I had done at a birthday party the previous night. After a big laugh in the group, I felt a bit irritated about the men's response to what I saw as a serious situation. Some minutes later we a voice in the radio announced that the big tsunami was eventually called off. People then returned to their houses or remained by the beach to stori more.

Later that day I visited Hedrick to eat lunch. Radio Vanuatu was on in the background. The tsunami warning shocking the country this morning was a natural conversation topic in the radio between music breaks. Hedrick and I were both relieved as we sat there on the pandanus mat-covered floor talking, drinking tea, and eating boiled taro with coconut milk. Our conversation turned to tsunami and religion, as these topics appeared closely intertwined in how people related to the situation that morning. Hedrick told me he was convinced that God was protecting us that day. «If you've got Jesus Christ in our heart, you don't need to be afraid of the tsunami or other hazards or dangers», he commented as we continued talking and eating. Hedrick was puzzled by whether the tsunami could have been a challenge from God to find out if people's faith was strong enough. Markriken, my classificatory *wowa* and husband of Hedrick's wife

Niely's sister Lieni, dropped by for a visit and agreed on Hedrick's views. They were both convinced that faith and prayer had contributed in keeping the tsunami away from Ahamb and Vanuatu. This morning, Markriken said, his wife and children were anxious about the tsunami. Markriken had tried to calm them down and got his wife to cook and prepare a meal as any normal day. Hedrick had a similar story. While his wife and children were on the beach awaiting a possible evacuation, Hedrick had told them to go back and prepare a meal. "The man is the head of the house and your wife learns from you. This means you have to be strong in your faith (in God)", Markriken commented to their responses. While their families went back to their houses, Markriken and Hedrick took the responsibility of making prayers. For the two men, this was a way of manifesting a strong faith to their families, and their ability to protect them. During my fieldwork men often expressed that a "mature man is a full Christian". Images of manhood on Ahamb may therefore pursue the classic ideal of the male as protecting his family through an affiliation with predominant cosmological powers (see Hutchinson 1996). I became curious if these men's decision to stay and pray implied that those who evacuated lacked faith. Hedrick rejected and said they had only followed information given by the government. Others also emphasised that to evacuate from all lowlying areas, such as Ahamb Island, was information that *Meteo* had given and should (generally) be followed.

Later that evening I went to an afternoon worship in my village. The worship worked both as a substitute for the cancelled public worship this morning and a special occasion to pray and express gratitude to God for saving us from the tsunami. Deacon Abel led the worship and started his sermon by referring to the Bible quote used in the "Mother's Prayer", John 14:14 telling "if you ask anything in my name, I will do it". "Today, we have had a special situation", he said. "There has been warnings about a tsunami hitting us, but it did not. "I believe, that every prayer helped in preventing a disaster today". Colin, an Elder of the Presbyterian Church, took over announcing that «it has been showed something good today. That we were here today and prayed when we had the tsunami warning". He continued: "These things happening (such as the tsunami) are signs from God. People must be strong now, each and everyone. In faith, and in everything they do». *Jif* Herold stood up and commented that it was important to not have any condescending attitudes towards those who evacuated. Hedrick, whom I had visited for lunch, clarified by refering to our conversation that it was not lack of faith

that made people leave, but that they followed the information from the Government. Three months after the tsunamiwarning I talked with Calsley, a father in his thirties and a boat operator about natural disasters and the tsunamiwarning:

People are making a lot of bad things in their lives. Such as USA and Russia who are dropping their bombs. People stay at a life that is not good. They forget God and a good life. As in Papua New Guinea where a tsunami hit them. There, people go to nightclubs, men go (and have sex) with women at daylight, like now. And then the tsunami came ... God is for example sending tsunamis when we stay with lives that are no good. As a warning. But for us who pray, who lives a life with Him, He will not hurt us.

Trusting the protective powers of God during the tsunamiwarning can reflect general notions of how a reciprocal relationship between people and God work<sup>31</sup>. Through offerings, prayers, and living a life that corresponds with Christian moral values, God will give humans protection, provision, and eventually salvation in return. Calsley's comment can reflect his acknowledgement of this reciprocal relationship, but also a critique of contemporary moral-liberal developments in Vanuatu and elsewhere that seems to deprive people from this kind of life (see Eriksen 2009a). During my time on Ahamb people often touched on the moral decay in Vanuatu's towns Port Vila and Luganvill. The liberal foreign inspired lifestyle and social problems of town were said to encourage conflicts, breakdowns of social relationships, and bring uncontrolled outbursts of sorcery.

Sorcery is a most feared phenomenom on Ahamb. It causes death, destruction, and division, and most people will do whatever it takes to have it eliminated. I will now discuss the role Christianity plays in relation to sorcery. I will also examine what I argue to be perhaps the most significant community ritual on Ahamb, the twice annually Bible Operation.

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<sup>31</sup> I later learned that some people were reluctant about evacuating to the mainland because they lacked land rights there and were afraid of trouble if staying on the land of others.



## ***Christianity opposing Sorcery***

Sorcery has many names in Vanuatu, and on Ahamb the term *posen* was most frequently used. Also black magic, *nakaimas*, and *kastom* are employed. These concepts apply to many practices involving the use of magic leaves. Different use can make the holder and objects invisible, making people travel in air or sea, make people fall in love with you, ruining people's enthusiasm for work or business, and killing or making people sick by poisoning their food or other ways<sup>32</sup>.

If unexplainable deaths or illness occurs, it is often blamed on sorcery even though usually nobody confesses to have performed it<sup>33</sup>. Most still insist on its existence, however. Some years ago there was an increase in sudden and unexpected deaths attributed to sorcery. This led the Presbyterian Church to implement the now twice annually Bible Operation in 2007. The goal of this ritual is to strengthen the Christian lives of people. It is most clearly recognised, however, in the pledge to not commit sorcery that everyone on Ahamb and the surrounding mainland villages must make<sup>34</sup>. According to most Ahamb people, sorcery is today more or less extinct on the island thanks to the Bible Operation and the many prayers of the community members.

## ***The Bible Operation***

The Bible Operation I attended took place after a regular Sunday worship in May. People were flocking towards the Presbyterian Church from every corner of the island this morning. I even observed people who rarely attend worships now coming carrying a Bible and *Nju Laef* psalm book under their arm. The topic of the sermon was obedience to God, and sorcery was emphasised as a serious violation against the will of God. The Pastor informed that today we would go through the sixth Bible Operation on the island. He connected the Bible's talks of apocalypse and the final judgement to choices people make in their lives. Sorcery was not the way to go. "The final judgement is coming", he

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<sup>32</sup> Much magic was talked about as initially good, but used today primarily for causing harm. Invisibility, for example, was planned to use for making Ahamb invisible to hide from bomber planes during World War II. This was a typical good use of *kastom*.

<sup>33</sup> Some church leaders told me that sorcerers had confessed to them. Because they are prayed for and forgiven by a church leader, however, he or she is expected to run free from further punishment by God or people if not resuming the practice.

<sup>34</sup> The Bible Operation is also performed in other Presbyterian Congregations in South Malakula and similar pledges are done other places in Vanuatu.

said. “We have the chance to make it good. As God says: ‘if anyone opens the door, I will give’”.

After the regular worship programme was completed, Elder Eddieboy explained how we were to make the pledge. A table and blackboard with the pledge written on it was carried out by to other Elders from the storage room. Two big Bibles were placed on the table. After singing a psalm, the male Elders gathered around the table and put their right hand on the Bible. They turned to the blackboard and read out loud and simultaneously the pledge written on it. Next out were the two female Elders and the Deacons. Then it was time for the remaining congregation. Groups of about seven, first rows first, came up, nodded towards the two Bibles and repeated the pledge after the Elder.

Mi mekem promis  
weten Holy Baebol ia,  
long nem blong God Papa, God Pikinini,  
mo God Tabu Spirit.

I make this promise  
with the Holy Bible,  
in the name of God the Father, God the  
Son,  
and God, the Holy Spirit,

se mi no save olgeta lif blong  
swit maot, killim tingting,  
killim bisnis, killim pikinini,  
mo olgeta posen olsem sue, nakaimas,  
toktok long spirit blong nasara,  
mo olgeta ded we i tekem ples,  
bifo kasem tedei mi no tajem wan.

that I do not know the leaves for making  
love magic, killing ideas,  
to destroy business, hurt children,  
and all posen such as sue, nakaimas,  
talking with the nasara spirit,  
and the dead,  
before and until today I have not used  
one.

Sipos mi tajem wan  
laef blong mi i stap long han blong God  
nomo.  
Mi promises.

If I do  
my fate is only for God to decide.  
I promise.

After making the pledge, the group nodded towards the Bible again and walked out of the church and home or outside to chat. Elder Eddieboy sat at the very front of the church room with a book writing down the names of everyone who gave their promise. After the session the Elders discussed what to do with those who had not shown up. Everyone in the community must make the pledge, and the church leaders split to look up those who were absent and had not reported being away. Those who are away have often arranged to make the pledge before leaving. Others who are absent, for example if ill or for other reasons did not show up in church, are paid a visit by a church leader and they do the pledge together.



*A group of women makes the pledge at Bible Operation.*

*Ahamb Presbyterian Church, May 19th 2010*

### ***The works of the Bible Operation***

I first learned about the Bible Operation when starting off with my initial research topic on environmental change. Before reaching Vanuatu I had been inspired by an article by Carlos Mondragón (2004) that included a passage on people's capacity to manipulate weather and sea movements through magic. I asked around whether they thought magic could be used to curb the island's coastal erosion. The answers varied but it was clear that no one could or wanted to perform such magic. If one tried, I was told, he or she would face a certain death. The reason was connected to how people understood the works of the Bible Operation. The general idea is that if a person has done the pledge but still performs sorcery, he or she will fall sick, be struck by an accident, and ultimately die. This is because the power of the sorcery

is turned against the sorcerer, or that God is taking the person's life. No one truly knows whether or not a person has actually committed sorcery, but suspicions usually follow from behaviour diverging from the social norm. A number of sorcery accusations emerge from land disputes that are putting parties against each other. The following story of an unexpected death is a typical one in which the Bible Operation is used for explanation:

Some years ago some the men from two *nasara* were in dispute about some land in the hills on the mainland. One of the *nasara* claimed they had bought the right to dwell on the land with a pig, kava and food products, while the other claimant also planned to use the land. The first *nasara* then put up a *shishimali* on the land area. This is a *kastom* sign symbolizing a warning to leave the area. If not, there will be trouble. Rumours said that the other claimant then had travelled to the East coast to buy sorcery to use against the people of the opposing *nasara*. One day a man of the *nasara* who put up the *shishimali* was in the garden on the disputed land. He made a prayer, as they always did when going to these gardens. A man then came walking, standing up and watching the man ready to work in the garden. It was to look for *haf kakai* (food scraps that can be used to make sorcery). The gardener could not recognise the person standing there. He suspected, however, that it was the man they had quarrelled with who had used sorcery to take the body of another man. The gardener then shouted the name of this man asking what he was doing. The man left, and a few days later the man they had disputed became sick. He had been to hospital in town without finding anything wrong. Not long after, the man died. People were surprised that this man, who was a regular church attendant, had made *posen*.

If the hospital fails in detecting a diagnosis, it is believed that the source of a person's illness must be outside of western biomedicine (*medesin blong waetman*). Sorcery, ancestral spirits, or God is believed to intervene, and explanations vary according to the behaviour of the patient. The Bible Operation and density of church activities are believed to create a "shield of protection" on Ahamb that is blocking out sorcery. This "protection" or neutralisation of sorcery works in different ways. One possibility is that the sorcerer will "come to light", as it is said, and be discovered before or during his action. This obstructs further proceedings, since sorcery must normally be performed in secrecy. Another possibility is that the sorcerer will fail, because he cannot focus completely on his task as he is also thinking about God, prayers, and the church. Yet another possible outcome is that the sorcery will be reversed and strike back on the performer, leaving the intended victim unharmed. As God is believed to have implicit ways of answering prayers, the same is understood in sanctioning people who break the pledge. For this reason one can never really know what will happen if tempted to do magic. According to everyone I talked to, this was enough to scare away most from trying.

## ***The Bible Operation Compared***

Engaging Christianity to drive out sorcery is not something new in Vanuatu. Robert Tonkinson illustrates how evangelist campaigns were organised by Christian activists in the 1970s to attack sorcery in South East Ambrym (1981: 249-261). The campaign included teams of evangelists moving from village to village, inducing people to confess their sins, make public commitment to their faith, and to surrender all magical objects. Groups in the villages organised regular prayer meetings where they prayed that the power of unsundered magical objects should turn against their possessors and cause them illness or death if they were not destroyed. People also prayed at boat passages, main roads and paths to neutralise the power of magic objects from elsewhere carried into South East Ambrym. Illness and deaths occurring before and after the prayer meetings were introduced, were attributed to the deceased failing to surrender their magical objects. Some of the sick confessed and recovered, and by 1978, Tonkinson argues, it was widely asserted that sorcery was abolished in South-East Ambrym. Thorgeir Kolshus presents a pledge similar to the Bible Operation done on Mota in the northern Banks Islands (2007: 1-4). The Mota pledge is called *Ō Vatavata*, which means “the Covenant”, and was done by all islanders some years after World War II. Even though years have passed, the pledge is still believed to make Mota a safer place. The background for *Ō Vatavata* goes back to the troubled mission history on the island. The Anglican Mission came early to Mota, and established what is most likely the very first independent Melanesian church. After a relapse into heathendom, however, the island was struck by uncontrolled sorcery that caused people to isolate from fear in their villages and the population to decline. An Anglican priest was begged to help save Mota people from probable extinction. A Sunday after worship the priest gathered everyone on the island and made them promise on his crucifix necklace to refrain from using any malevolent substances or sorcery in the future. If they did, the spells would hit back on the perpetrator, leaving the intended victim unmarked. In addition to making Mota a more secure place, *Ō Vatavata* is also referred to as a proof of the church’s superior power over the traditional *Suqe* graded society, sorcery, and other elements of *kastom*.

## ***Bible Operation and Presbyterian Church worships as Communitas***

Ahamb does not have black magic because everyone is praying. If you want to do black magic and you try it you will be dead. Because black magic is contact with a devil and when you do it, God will destroy your life. God has created us human beings in His image. If a man tries to destroy the life of another man, God must take your life.

*Noki Tom*

The quote by Noki Tom above reflects the anti-social nature of sorcery as well as the potential danger that awaits sorcerers on Ahamb. Doing sorcery is not only a matter of breaching an individual promise with God, but is also expressed as an attack on God's work of creation in which all humans are constituted, connected, and undifferentiated.

I suggest that the Bible Operation and other Christian rituals represent a liminal phase between different and opposing social structures: a poly-ontology of difference and a mono-ontology of sameness. This is because the social status of the participating individuals in church ritual is significantly transformed: From being an individual person, a family member, or a member of a particular *nasara*, the ritual participant joins in a consequent equality and communion with other participants. During worship and other churchly contexts, participants come closer to acknowledge an essential communality as members of the same group and as parts of the same cosmological image.

Throughout the chapter we have seen some examples of how many Ahamb people express God as the superior power in a range of different contexts. I suggest that looking to Louis Dumont's concept of a hierarchy of values can be fruitful to understand the social significance of the church. As we saw in the introduction, Dumont argues that in every cultural system there is one ultimate value that is the organisational locus of society and which encompass its counterparts (1980). We have seen that the church and works of the Christian God seems to engage a social form emphasising community and ontological oneness. In contrast, other pressing issues in Ahamb community, such as questions on land rights and political control, tend to bring about separation and notions of differentiation between groups.

I suggest that the Christian God, together with Ahamb emphasis on relationships in kinship and general social practice, must by and large be recognised as paramount values to the antithetical element of differentiation (see Dumont 1986: 31-32). In church rituals, individuals are together submitting to the values of God and relationships. The sense of relationship is

further strengthened by the notion of all humans as undifferentiated companions under the predominant cosmological power of the Christian God. Ahamb society, represented by the church attendants, can be said to emerge in this liminal phase of ritual as an unstructured and "relatively undifferentiated" communion, or *communitas*, of equal individuals (Turner 2008 [1969]: 96).

Turner argues that people are united through their common ground in living community or *communitas* (1987 [1974]: 48). To easily evoke *communitas* in ritual, Turner argues, there must also be many occasions outside the ritual in which *communitas* has been achieved (1987 [1974]: 56). For Ahamb, I suggest that the extensive webs of kinship and principles of interaction inside of it constitute a central context for notions of *communitas* outside of the church. All people on Ahamb are in essence related "insiders" and integrated in each other's social landscapes through criss-crossing kin relations.



*High attendance at Presbyterian Church worships*

Turner also argues that if *communitas* can be developed within a ritual context, it can also be transferred over to secular or non-ritual life for a while. This will help mitigate or lessen some corrosive effects of social conflicts rooted in material interest; such as land; or discrepancies in the ordering of social relations; such as dissension on seniority and status (Turner 1987 [1974]: 56). This relationship between *communitas* reinforced in church ritual, and opposing tendencies in the non-ritual context, will again bring up question of values. The re-fusion of Robanias and Lamburbaghor from the beginning of this chapter can serve as an example. The

resolution between the two previously separated nasara was supported by an acknowledgement of the value of staying united. The value of unity that Carl related to Christian morality thus encompassed the values of seniority and land ownership that were elements causing separation between the parties. I argue that the values of relationships and unity in Ahamb society are most durably produced in the community based ritual context provided by the church. I will come back to a more thorough discussion on this argument in chapter five when examining the community's eventual reintegration from the Lanur dispute.

In this chapter we have seen how practices and values of equality, unity, and cooperation emerge in the context of the church. We have also seen that cosmological ideas of the church support a mono-ontology of oneness instead of separation. In addition, the mono-ontological notions in Ahamb Christianity seem to pursue the value of relationships in how God answers prayers and in its moral values. Exchanges or gifts, such as the tithe and thanksgiving, do point back to single persons or households, but are done in an acknowledgement of one's place in a larger community and cosmological space. And persons entering church ritual somewhat confines to social and cosmological forces that are encompassing that of the individual, household or nasara.

The next chapter will continue exploring the ways in which a communal social form is produced on Ahamb, but in the non-churchly contexts of kinship and generalised gift reciprocity. The discussions in both of these two chapters will suggest that relationships and community represents a bottomline of Ahamb cultural values. This point is suggested in the regular scolding accusation of having hae tingting (to think highly of oneself). Hae tingting refers acting as one is superior to others and failing to acknowledge your obligations towards relationships the accused engages in. Having hae tingting is often followed up by accusations of the person thinking he/she alone is "the boss of his/her life" (Hemi ting se hem wan nomo i boss blong laef blong hem). This expression points to the moral obligations to acknowledge a dependency on social relationships as well as on God, because ultimately, as people say, God nomo, hemi boss blong laef (Only God is the boss of life).





*Espel and other mama preparing mats*



*Outside of Ahamb Presbyterian Church*



*Returning to Ahamb with firewood from the mainland gardens*



*Ahamb kastom dressing and artifacts used for the kastom dance*

## **4 Relationships, *Rsrskore*, Business**

Contemporary Ahamb economy is a mixed subsistence and cash economy. Most food is obtained from gardens and from fishing, and a part of the produce is distributed to relatives and other persons with whom one engages in relationships. Money is becoming an increasingly important part of Ahamb life, however. The community-financed church and community organisations demand payments and many parents want secondary school education for their children and must pay school fees. In addition, desires for some commodities and maybe a western style concrete house also fuel an intensification of money flows in the lives of Ahamb people. The objective of this chapter is to investigate cultural processes through which elements of modernity are interpreted and negotiated, and how these processes take place within the Ahamb framework of cultural values. I will suggest that an intensified participation in a modernity characterised by capitalist modes of objectifying human conditions evoke local resistance (see Lattas 1993, Rio 2002, Taussig 1980). A broader argument of the chapter is that a pure prediction of the symbolic meanings in modern phenomena such as capitalism is impossible (Yanagisako 2002). Rather, the local implications of capitalism and other aspects of a "global" modernity can only be understood through first understanding the cultural matrix into which elements of this modernity is incorporated (see Bloch & Parry 1989: 21).

### ***Kinship and Gift exchange***

Gift exchange as a way to maintain alliances and social relations in Melanesia is well documented by a wide range of writers (Malinowski 2002 [1922], Mauss 1990 [1950], Wagner 1986, Strathern 1988, Weiner 1992, Rio 2007). Exchange initiates and maintains relationships, and received gifts such as mats, pigs, and fowl can be used to initiate new relationships in the future. I argue that the exchange of gifts to produce sociality and group solidarity not only involves quantifiable material objects but just as much "giving" of respect and support (see Taylor 2008: 65-66).

In chapter two we had a brief look at some conducts for interaction following the *tok ple* and *tambu* relationships. Most kin relationships carry some sort of norm for interaction that enhances the notion of the relationship being significant. As everyone on Ahamb today is in one way or another related by intermarriage, networks of kinship bring people together in multirelational bonds. The vast network of relatives becomes evident in ceremonies where all kin is expected to take part, such as the ritual stages following from a person's death.

### ***Bringing Relatives Together in the Kakai Blong Ded***

When a person dies on Ahamb the event is followed by a set of communal practices such as the four ritual feasts referred to as *kakai blong ded* (meals accompanying death). The first usually takes place on the day of death, and is followed by feasts on the fifth, twentieth, and hundredth day post mortem. The four feasts is a modified continuation of the *kastom* practice of keeping the dead body on a bed for a hundred days. The marked first, fifth, twentieth, and hundredth day, reflect stages of bodily transformation until its eventual decay.

As soon as a death has occurred it is easy to recognise the communal character of the event. When the news reach out to the villages, people come walking from all over the island to the home of the deceased's family while weeping loudly to share their grief. Relatives from villages on the mainland and elsewhere also arrive in big numbers as they receive the message. At the home of the dead, the closest family surrounds the body covered by pieces of fabric as they mourn over the loss of the loved one. More distant relatives form a crowd around them, weeping and holding around each other. After crying people sit down quietly at the outskirts of the scene. Hundreds of people are gathered in and around the yard of the dead, often for hours. Close relatives sometimes move in with the deceased's family for a week or two to help with arrangements and give comfort. Others spend the days there. Kin who have the means help organise generators, lights, and tarpaulin to cover the area in case of rain. This area becomes a communal space where the mourning assemble for the first couple of weeks. It is usually in this area that the four *kakai blong ded* are arranged. The day or following day of the death, a funeral ceremony is held in the church before the dead is buried. The first *kakai blong ded* is organised on the evening after the burial by relatives of the deceased. Everyone on the island is expected to come to give support and take part in the meal.

Until the twentieth day after a death, people from all over the island provide food for the family of the deceased and those who are staying with them. After the death of a woman, I counted about fifty persons staying by the house of her family for the first two weeks. On the fifth day there is typically a communal weeping in the morning where the mourning relatives are gathered. Around noon a communal meal is organised by the family of the deceased. In the afternoon there is another feast with prayers, a sermon by a church leader, kava drinking and *laplap*. All *mama* (married women) of households related to the dead and her/his family make *laplap* from their household's garden produce, while young male relatives often go fishing to lift the *laplap* with meat. At the twentieth day there is another big feast where the family of the dead typically slaughters a bullock for everyone who wants to come and eat *laplap* with good meat. The hundredth day represents a fulfillment of the mourning period, and *laplaps* are made once again and shared out together with dishes of meat and rice. Practically everyone on the island attends this impressively crowded event which in Bislama is just termed *handred des* (hundred days). There is kava drinking for the men, numbers of *laplap* spread out on mats, sometimes TVs showing DVDs, and rare electric light covering a vast area where hundreds of people are gathered.

The mourning period also involves other communal practices to symbolise sympathy and fellowship in the loss of a loved one. For the first five days after a death, men and women neither change clothes nor wash<sup>35</sup>. No one shall do any major work during these days other than going to the garden for the necessary food. From the day of death, men leave their beard to grow, and do not shave before completing the mourning period on the hundredth day. I suggest that all of these practices reflect death-rituals as one context in which generalised exchange of both sentiment and material objects come to action. These exchanges further nourish the relationships between individuals, households, and *nasara* on the island and elsewhere where there are participants.

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<sup>35</sup> The *kastom* used to be five days for women and twenty days for men. Today five days is accepted for both genders.



*A group of men shaving together for a hundred des.*

### ***Gift Exchange in a “Modern” Context***

Gift giving on Ahamb is part of larger bodies of exchange in daily and ceremonial life that are heavily morally loaded. Traditional Melanesian gift exchange works to accept the social relationship with the exchange partners and acknowledge one’s part of a larger social landscape (Rio 2007). These meanings are on Ahamb closely intertwined with notions of Christian morality. To have a good heart and think about others is synonymous with giving. To keep things for one self is a sign of unwillingness to engage in social relationships are signs of egoism and greed. To engage in relationships with “love”, however, is essentially social, and refers to shared livelihood and gifts (Scott 2007: 147). The increasing role of money on Ahamb has come to represent a potential “lifting out” of the regular transactions of gift-givings and sharing. This causes challenges to ongoing processes of producing sociality. I will now discuss the typical scenario that occurs when the morality of social relationships is not acknowledged in transactions between actors. The clearest context in which this occurs is in that of business operation and monetary possession.

### ***Business***

For over a decade, the two brothers Nil Tom and Tom Hanzel operated the biggest and most successful privately owned business in the history of Ahamb. Starting in 1986, the business grew to include not only a regular retail store selling basic goods such as kerosene, sugar, salt,

canned meat, but also cattle breeding, petrol, and a boat service. The two had a freezer for storing and selling fish, and bought copra and dried kava for resale in the towns Port Vila and Luganville. According to Tom Hanzel the business started to decline in 1999, and in 2001 the once successful business was liquidated. The popular explanation and blame was that someone was jealous of their success and applied a type of sorcery called *nawoshwosh* on the store. *Nawoshwosh* is often blamed when a person feels that his or her enthusiasm for ongoing work is killed, and involves the application or burial of a powerful magic leaf on the area where the victim lives or dwells. The power of the leaf makes the mind of the victim tired of working and thinking about projects he or she is engaged in. For Nil Tom and Tom Hanzel the effect was symptomatic: a total loss of interest in doing work and making money.

Albert, a man of thirty, has a similar story. A few years back he built a few bungalows for tourists and other visitors to stay on Ahamb. South Malakula does not receive many tourists, but a few visitors eventually showed up at Albert's simple beachfront bungalows. The small bungalow business became a personal success story for Albert and generated a substantial income. After some time, however, his interest in making work and managing the bungalow project declined and not long after he had to close down the bungalows. Albert blamed the resignation on *nawoshwosh* that made him lose interest and power in work.

In both of these examples jealousy was put forward as the provoking factor leading to *nawoshwosh* that discouraged the ideas and prospects of the business owners. Jealousy emerges when someone sees another person having success (*kam antap*) compared to others. The unwillingness to see others *kam antap* was talked about by a number of people as a widespread attitude in South Malakula and was blamed for the lack of development in the region<sup>36</sup>. I suggest that to understand better the challenges of doing business and the resistance to people that *kam antap*, we shall turn to the local concept of *rsrskore*.

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<sup>36</sup> When people spoke of a "lack of development" they usually referred to the absence of a road on the mainland (the closest road being in Lamap), and no reliable source of money.



## ***Rsrskore***

John: Tom, you smoke?

Tom: No, I don't. Do you?

John: Yeah. I just started. In February.

Tom: Why did you do that?

John: Well... I don't know? ... All boys here do it ...  
All the boys here, you see them? They smoke.

The dialogue over took place a late evening in May as the soft and warming evening sun was about to set. I was sitting at the outdoor stage of Ahamb primary school with John, a young man of twentytwo, watching other young men of the island train for the annual Independence Day football tournament. The tournament includes teams from other villages in the district. This year the event was to be hosted by Ahamb, and there was no way the boys of *Varus* (the Ahamb team) would let anyone else take the title on their home ground. As John and I sat watching, I thought that it must be unusual to suddenly pick up smoking in the twenties. Most, both in Norway and Vanuatu, seemed to start in their teens. A few days later I came to talk about these thoughts with Calsley and Albert after worship in SDA where they are members. Calsley made a recognising grin, and told me there was a word for that on Ahamb: "We call it *rsrskore*. It means: You see something that is no good, but still you want to do it yourself"<sup>37</sup>. They explained that the concept was applicable to a range of contexts. Drinking kava, for example, that occupied almost every man on the island in the evenings, and also going to church. It was something everyone did. "People follow the group", Calsley argued.

The following day I discussed young people's declining church attendance with Afel who was a teacher at the Presbyterian Sunday school. Afel was upset with how much people "depend on a second man, and rarely can decide by themselves to do anything". Afel told me that one person must first take the lead and engage people and then others will join and do the same things. If some youngsters spend the evenings drinking kava and not caring about church, for example, it is easy that most other youngsters will do the same. But, as Afel said, if someone takes the lead and tells the others "now, let's do something for the church", then people will follow and join in. I mentioned how all this reminded me about John who just picked up

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<sup>37</sup>*Yu luk se i no gud nomo, be yu tu yu wantem se yu tu yu mekem*

smoking, and Afel said that all of this was typical *rsrskore*. A typical context in which *rsrskore* emerges, Afel explained, is that of external commodities:

(With *rsrskore*) you are much attracted to external life (*aotsaed laef i bigwan*). Kava, smoking... if watching someone having a video, he thinks: I want that too. He does not want to be under another man, he must be the same or better (*pittim*) than him.

If *rsrskore* emerges in a desire for new things, this can be both “positive” and “negative”:

On the positive side is work with the church. If you see one man is a preacher, I too want to be that. But the negative side is like, if he is a rich man, I want to be a rich man too. But if you cannot be a rich man, one tries and tries but cannot achieve it, until the day when you die. You want so much what others have that you just continue worry, worry and then you are dead.

Graham and Neto, whom I often visited for meals and stories, told me how *rsrskore* could be positive in that it was “like a teaching. The one who looks can teach something”. Sure enough, during my time on Ahamb I was often amazed by the skills of people in a wide range of fields from hunting and fishing techniques, building canoes and traditional houses, and to more recently introduced mechanics and western style carpentry. Most of the entrepreneurs on Ahamb; carpenters, bakers, a boat builder, and the businessmen, had for the most part learned their skills without formal training that few, in fact, could afford. Rather, their training had emerged from a desire to obtain skills from people they had met and situations they had encountered. *Rsrskore* as a “drive” towards achieving or taking part in what other people does, can be both encouraged and discouraged by people. Encouragement can happen when there is a possibility to progress. Discouragement happens when one fails to participate in that progress. In other contexts, such as with John, to *rsrskore* is also to acquit oneself from *hae tingting* accusations because one confine to the practice of others. *Rsrskore* therefore appears as a social expression of curiosity and interest in the new, but it also carries a deep meaning of sameness and togetherness in daily living. In context of “modernity”, *rsrskore* can therefore reflect an interest in progress, but not at the expense of relationships.

During fieldwork I was myself adopted into the Ahamb kinship system and became engaged in reciprocal relationships with relatives and others. Sometimes I experienced other’s discontent with how I at times was very busy with tasks around the island. In periods I had plans almost everyday to do an interview, eat a meal or drink kava with someone some place on the island. When talking with people in Vanuatu it is common to ask “where are you



going?” or “what are you doing today?” Sometimes people answered the questions for me telling that I was to “just relax” (*spell nomo*). I had noticed that people often underplayed their tasks for the day, and said they were to *spell nomo* or *go long garen nomo* (just go to the garden)<sup>38</sup>. Throughout fieldwork I also noticed that being “busy” was used to complain about someone (or oneself) being too caught up with work and therefore did not have time off (*no gat spell*). Being “busy” was also likely to be used as a mocking word associated with being high on oneself and not caring too much about others (having *hae tingting*)<sup>39</sup>. I suggest that to not be “busy” has a social significance because the daily maintenance of social relationships depends on people having spare time to engage with each other, share stories, and in other ways let go of their personal business.

In context of *rsrskore*, I suggest that being “busy” can provoke moral notions that others too should be busy working something. But if undermining the comprehensiveness of one’s tasks, it means that you do not try to put yourself above others or make them feel subjugated. This social type is comparable to insights Gullestad (1992, 2001) draws from Norwegian everyday life in distinguishing the concept of “equality” from codes of interaction appearing to be connected to equality. The logic in the codes of interaction is described as “sameness”, where actors, through appearing similar, claim one another as equal. It becomes a social form where the *commonalities* between the parties are emphasised, while differentiating features are kept inferior in the daily social interaction (Vike, Lidén & Lien 2001: 17). *Rsrskore*, then, can be understood as an expression of the goal of producing sociality and community across difference. I will explore the relevance of this point by returning to the case of the businessmen.

### ***Back to Business. Sorcery and Sociality***

Albert’s explanation of why his bungalow project was attacked by *nawoshwosh* was that he had earned much money but been too egoistic about his winnings. Albert, who was now the owner of a small retail store and tentative bread bakery, told me that the key to avoid misfortune as a businessman was to share and “love” people. These actions, he said, typically involves giving a gift to costumers when they come to shop, and to support fundraisings or

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<sup>38</sup> If one ought to go fishing, one should not tell anyone and no one should ask the fisherman, as it is believed to bring bad luck in fishing. Rather than asking, one can find out whether a person has gone out through a statement, for example “I see the weather is good today, I believe John has gone fishing”.

<sup>39</sup> “Busy” in this context is translated from the Bislama *bisi tumas* that means “very busy”. People only said this about themselves if they were occupied with work for an external party’s interest. If people were working with their own or of relatives, they would usually term it *bisi smol nomo*: “just a littlebit busy”.

ceremonies such as the *kakai blong ded*. During my stay on Ahamb, I learned that most storeowners today, in one way or another, shared parts of their winnings to help relatives or community projects. Some paid school fees for relatives, and most helped support arrangements in the community or village. Willy, the headmaster of Ahamb primary school, was at the time of my research one of few on the island receiving a fixed salary from the Government. Because of his reliable access to money, he was, as the businessmen, expected to engage more extensively in sharing and gift giving than the average person. Both single persons and community organisations came to Willy to ask for contributions or a loan if they were in need for money. He usually accepted, and felt ashamed to ask for a return. As he said: “we are all Christians. We got love, and that is why we give”, thus reflecting the syncretism of the giving of gifts and Christian moral values.

The general tendency on Ahamb is that the more money a person accumulates, the more people expect the person to share and contribute (see Rio 2002:135). In their continuous process of redistributing resources, Willy and the businessmen facilitate sociality, and may therefore qualify for the Melanesian “big man” status as it is suggested by Sahlins (1963). Even though the redistributing actions of these persons place them in a certain position and attract many people to them, the “big man”-tendencies do not generally bring about too much prestige or elevation from other people. Rather than facilitate rank, to sponsor ceremonies and distribute wealth on Ahamb appears as a pure necessity for the wealthy person to operate without sanctions. In short, those who have a steady access to money are expected to redistribute their surplus in order to avoid becoming a threat to the social order.

As Rio argues, money, as opposed to garden produce, or pigs for that matter, has a greater potential for creating jealousy and anger if not in circulation than the far less materially stable and durable garden produce. The latter can be kept to oneself and outside of social engagement (2002: 134). Money is a limited resource but regarded as a necessity for maintaining a decent life. To not extend these socially defined goods to others means one is not willing to support neither the lives of relatives nor the remaining community. Keeping money to oneself produces or enforces the impression of the money holder as anti-social, having *hae tinting*, and raises doubts about the person’s Christian moral.

Business or other activities that can deprive persons from relationships are thus infused by a negative morality. If these activities are converted to serve the reproduction of relationships, however, they tend to become morally positive. In those cases where individual accumulation

has become an end in itself or involvement is no longer meant to reproduce sociality, images of sorcery can emerge as sanctions to the inappropriate tendencies (see Bloch & Parry 1989: 27). When business owners as members of social webs fail in acknowledging their obligations to share and give gifts to maintain relationships, sorcery can work as a mechanism to restore balance in relationships and the social order. *Nawoshwosh* striking businesses owners on Ahamb can be compared to how Rio (2002) explains underlying reasons for an exceptional outbreak of sorcery on Ambrym in 1999. Rio suggests that the sorcery upsurge manifested notions of losing control and existential crisis due to the presence of foreign cosmologies of capitalism, colonialism, and Christianity. So even though sorcery brings destruction when causing harm to people, it can also be understood as a protest, and “in a sense reinforce the communal moral of giving and sharing as against the modern tendency to claim rights and keep to oneself” coming with intensifications of money and commodity markets (Rio 2002: 132).

Images of sorcery undermining business can also result from attempts to comply with the communal moral of giving and sharing, however. Tom Hanzel told me that another reason for the decline of their successful store was large outstanding amounts from customers buying on credit. When I first arrived on Ahamb, Albert’s retail store too, was closed due to large amounts of outstanding money. When explaining the liquidation of previous businesses and projects in his village of Robanias, Skipson meant that many of them had suffered from a widespread concept he termed *tumas boss* (“too many bosses”). This implied that relatives of the manager regarded the business as a collective phenomenon. Relatives expected their shopping to be on the credit roll, which in practice meant free goods. As any other transactions, store shopping was regarded as a part of the greater body of gift exchange. Without money coming in, stores and public kava-bars had to close down. A similar destiny met two cargo vessels belonging to and servicing the Ahamb community in the 1970s and 1980s. I was told that the captain and engineer used the ships to help relatives when they were not in service transporting them for a low price to places they had errands. When the management of the ships involved flow of gifts to comply with the moral bonds of kinship and community, the operation that depended on objectified money payments was not viable for long.

## ***Capitalism, Modernity, Social Change***

Ahamb engagement in monetary economy and other elements of Western modernity is, as we have seen, understood to constrain the practices of giving and sharing that are both fundamental to reproduce sociality and important Christian moral values. The reason is that people are drawn towards individual satisfaction of modern wants at the expense of relationships. Most people on Ahamb do not see anything wrong with money per se, and have nothing against engaging in commercial exchanges. The problem occurs when money and modern commodities are unequally distributed and become symbolic of an exchange form assuming independence of transactors, challenging the previous ideal of gift exchange that assumes a relationship between them (Toren 1989: 143).

During a fieldbreak in Port Vila I visited Col, a man of Ahamb who had been living in town for about a decade. While enjoying a typical Vila-dinner of rice, some meat and vegetables sent by relatives from the island, we discussed the significance of kin in town and on Ahamb. At this time Col was working at the University of South Pacific (USP) and he criticised how young people studying in Australia and elsewhere came back with foreign lifestyles:

Among some of those who come back to USP, their thoughts about themselves are high (*tingting blong olgeta I stap hae*). Those who study to become businessmen become selfish men. Because if you want to become something successful you must be selfish. That's the theory of business. Theory of family is that you give to one another and share. That gives success in the family. Many who go overseas come back with this theory: if you want a house, a good car, you must be selfish. All of this is changing Vanuatu. But if we got love, we still share.

Col drew a pie chart and argued that “love” reserved for family relationships was about to decline at the expense of “business”, “position” (career), “education”, “something else in your life”, and “an association one has joined”. Before, he argued, kin was the most important. Now, however, people use less and less time and resources for maintaining kin relationships. To my question on why he thought it was so, he answered:

In Vila everyone wants a house, a car and land... it is a concept... it is like this now, one sees another person having a truck, a house. And you want it yourself too! It is *rsrskore*, that's the concept. One is going to the theory of business now. “Why am I not having what I could have?” It is because one is not greedy. It is too much focus on family, on sharing and so forth. These things (attitudes on subordinating family for personal progress) are starting to come to the island now.

Many on Ahamb drew similar oppositions between the “ways of the island” characterised by kinship and religion, and life of town and the West depriving these values for money and material gains. As most people were more than positive to development and new commodities, this opposition was not necessarily as empirical as it was discursive. At the bottom of most people’s evaluation of transactions, however, there is a high moral value of recognizing relationships. This value is seen to dwindle as Ahamb takes part in the modern developments of Vanuatu that includes an intensification of capitalist cosmologies and liberal land politics.



*MV Brisk is together with Tina I connecting Ahamb to relatives, public services, and markets in Port Vila*

## ***Enroaching the Tension between Money and Sociality***

### ***The Case of The Ahamb Business Association***

During the first months of 2010, news came out about a new project that was meant to help people finding money and fuel development on the island. The project was named the Ahamb Business Association (ABA) and was an initiative from John Salla, a man of the island with a university degree from Australia and a government job in Vila. The association was supposed to include businessmen and other progressive thinkers of the community in an attempt to mediate people’s need for a stable flow of money, but without jeopardizing the moral bonds of kinship and community.

The first step of the association was to resume local production of copra and cacao after a ten years pause. Most islanders had coconut palms and cocoa trees planted on their land from the

colonial times when the price was high. After a fall in copra prices during the last decades, people switched to kava as their main cash crop, leading to most coconut plantations now being overgrown with bush. The men behind the association found it to be a paradox that large resources of copra were left unextracted while the owners lacked money. ABA planned to buy copra and cocoa directly off people by giving money on the spot. They meant this would be far better than the slow and unreliable individual sales to kava-bars in town. Sometimes the payment from these sales could take two or three months to arrive the farmer. And often, payments did not arrive in time for the deadlines of school fees. This was a major concern among families who had two or more children in secondary school simultaneously as the total fees would exceed the money they could earn<sup>40</sup>.

A second step would be to invest the association's profit from copra and cacao re-sales in a piece of land in Port Vila. Here they would build a house for Ahamb people could to stay for a low price while in town for making market or going to hospital. This was an important goal of the association as not everyone on the island had town-residing relatives to stay with. There were also plans to buy kava from people, also by giving payment on the spot, for resale to the many kavabars in town. Because kava from South Malakula was especially popular in Vila, the association wanted to trademark the Ahamb kava and negotiate a set price and consistent supplies with the kavabars. A third and last step of the association was to invest in a community ship to ensure the best possible connection between Ahamb and the towns. As it would take years to save money for the ship, a preliminary plan was to negotiate with an existing cargo ship to carry passengers and cargo between Ahamb and Vila for a fair price.

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<sup>40</sup> From 2009 primary education became free in Vanuatu and on Ahamb. School fees of 18.000 Vatu per trimester are still paid for secondary education.



*Some men of the ABA drying and scaling copra by coconut plantations on the mainland.*

The business association was mainly referred to as an establishment to help community members find money for school fees and other expenses. Billy, the association's secretary, told me that businesses and stores had become more and more important in peoples lives, but still the community had not benefitted from this growth. At a launching party that was held in the public dining hall, the Pastor and leading Elder of the Presbyterian Church praised the initiative and the association's objectives. Together with the chairman of the Council of Chiefs and members of the association, they held speeches and gave the association their dedication and blessings. In the church leader's speeches it was emphasised how it was a "historic day for Ahamb" because it gathered the community around something communal. Earlier businesses were only about private profit, it was said, but now the community was also to take part. In the Pastor's speech he thanked God for answering the people of Ahamb. He argued that God had given a special gift of knowledge to the businessmen, and also appointed a thanks to the men behind the association for "catching straight the point of God" in helping the community.

Setting up the business association was a community-level attempt to help Ahamb people get a more steady access to money. It can also be seen as institutionalising the reciprocal relationships between businessmen and the remaining island population to help legitimise the operation of the former. I suggest that the church leaders represented a crucial step in legitimizing business as a part of the island's social structure when blessing the project for its focus on helping the community and thereby joining the work of God. Through its "purification" in the practices of ABA, business was incorporated into the encompassing socio-moral structure of the church. Most people I talked to were positive to the association's

objectives and were excited to re-engage in copra production. Some, however, expressed disappointment with the price they got for their produce. When I spoke to some Ahamb people in February 2011 many were fully engaged in drying and selling copra. A ship had started to visit the island for direct purchase, and the island population seemed to use both this opportunity and ABA for their sales. At least partly succeeding in achieving acceptance, I suggest that the business association can be interpreted as a culturally specific mediator in the encounter between the Ahamb socio-cultural world and the intensification of capitalist ideas and ideals.

### ***Negotiation and Creation of “local” Capitalism***

Michael Taussig (1980) shows some comparable responses to capitalist influence among newly proletarianised peasants in the 1970s’ rural South America. Among displaced peasants employed at sugarcane plantations in Colombia there is a belief that male plantation workers sometimes enter into amoral secret contracts with the devil to increase the production and hence their own wage. While alive, the individual worker in Colombia is said to be but a “puppet in the hands of the devil”, and the money from wages can only be spent immediately on luxury consumer goods. Investing money from a devil affiliation to earn more money is believed to be pointless, as land or livestock obtained from this money are believed to become sterile and the animals will die. Some people, however, say that although the money cannot buy productive goods, it and should be shared with one’s friends who, in contrast to the worker, are able to use it as ordinary money (1980: 94-95). Similarly, to use and “individualise” money from involvement with cash economy on Ahamb is discouraged. Accumulation of money or keeping investments purely for oneself can make both the person and the project vulnerable for sorcery attacks. But through redistribution of profit to kin and community, money is “purified” as it is transformed into something which can be safely incorporated into, and even nourish, relationships and the community (Bloch & Parry 1989: 23, Toren 1989: 158). Taussig argues that the engagement with the devil among peasants in rural Latin America is most importantly a response of the peasants and neophyte proletarians to their alienation and loss of control over their means of production. Under capitalist influence, the means of production has rather come to control them. Similarly, sorcery on Ahamb as we have seen it in this chapter, emerge when foreign cultural values, represented by capitalist ideas and ideals, take over and challenge the local socio-cultural order. The



world of market relations objectifying human conditions can thus appear as closely associated with notions of evil in both rural Latin America and on Ahamb (1980: 17-18).

I argue that the ABA are trying to bridge the gap between two apparently incompatible cultural systems by reproducing local socio-cultural values while simultaneously advocating for a circulation of money. Desirable elements of a market economy are kept, while the less-fitting elements are left out, such as the dislocation of individuals from the community, differences in wealth, economic laws triumphing socio-moral values, and production, not man, being the aim of the economy (Taussig 1980: xii).

In her book on Northern Italy's silk industry, Yanagisako (2002) criticises Taussig and other anthropological studies' depiction of capitalism as a homogenizing and acultural economic force. Many of these studies, she argues, apply a "utilitarian-reductionist logic" with the simple focus of tracing the effects of capitalism on people's cultural lives. In her book, Yanagisako instead advocates for exploring how people in specific circumstances connect, negotiate, and forge capitalist discourses and their complex meanings. Arguing that all capitalist practices are products of historically situated cultural processes, she proposes a model of culture and capitalism as mutually constituted processes rather than distinct structures or institutions, as suggested by Harvey (1989, see 2002: 6). Instead of applying universal models of capitalism, therefore, she proposes taking into account that diverse forms of capitalism can occur in different places and that there is also a possible coexistence of diverse capitalist practices in the same geopolitical space (2002: 7).

Akin to Yanagisako's argument, the "capitalist form" we have seen emerging on Ahamb is probably not exactly the same as among family firms in North Italy's silk industry, mountain farmers in Norway, nor among brokers on Manhattan. The Ahamb version that was "institutionalised" with the ABA was a result of negotiations with capitalist modes over time. It was also an attempt to mediate local cultural values and prevailing capitalist ideas at this specific point in history. The encounter between external capitalist modes and Ahamb cultural values can be said to represent an encounter between different cultural systems. Tsing (2005) suggests that this encounter produces "friction" between systems or ideologies that opens up for a space of negotiation and production of new cultural meaning. ABA can thus be interpreted as a product of negotiation processes occurring in this space. The relationship between market economy and Ahamb socio-cultural values as two orders is thus not necessarily one of static and absolute opposition, as Taussig can give an impression of.

Rather, because money has the potential to continually be transformed into the other sphere, it might just as likely come to represent an image of the successful reproduction of community.

As we have seen, money and external forms of development are desired by many on Ahamb. Still, they are represented as potentially subversive of social relationships and other important cultural values. The context in which money and development are best accepted is when they are used as instruments to produce the same local cultural values. The meanings connected to these “modern” forms are both contextually defined and constantly renegotiated and should therefore be understood within a wider context of the Ahamb life world at a specific time in history. We will now return to the dispute on Lanur Island where central ideas about reciprocity, belonging, and place came up as topics. We will see that a reintegration of the divided community slowly emerged, and I will discuss this process with reference to Ahamb cultural values that we have gained some insight into in the two last chapters.

## 5 Reintegration and Valuing Relationships

In chapter two we saw how an extensive dispute evolved involving people of Ahamb and some persons of the mainland village Farun. A man from Ahamb, but not manples, had sold Lanur Island a few kilometers East of Ahamb to a foreign investor. The legitimate kastom landowner had at this point not been properly settled, and a Land Tribunal was to be set up in Farun. A group of autochthonous Ahamb men opposed, and criticised the non-autochthonous islanders for working against the autochthonous. The group claimed that the chairman of the Ahamb Council of Chiefs, who belonged to a non-autochthonous nasara, had been bribed by the landseller into supporting the Farun Land Tribunal. In Farun they would use a land tenure system called *Bahriran* to judge the case. This system had the potential to deprive the autochthonous for much of their land. Adding to other matters of discontent with how the non-autochthonous seemed to overshadow the manples, the autochthonous coalition claimed the Council of Chiefs consisting of mostly non-autochthonous chiefs to dismiss. The time was right, they thought, to regain control and re-establish previous roles and positions in the community. This would imply a greater emphasis on the connection between kinship and land and reaffirm the hierarchical relationship between native/non-native and host/guest.

### ***Back to the Meeting***

As we saw, the autochthonous coalition arranged a meeting at the public dining hall where their matters of discontent were announced and where they proposed for new members to the Council of Chiefs. During the meeting some of the central figures in the autochthonous opposition gave testimonies and expressed their opinions on the topics taken up. In general, people seemed to agree on the first point of the agenda, concerning the Council of Chiefs failure to establish an Ahamb Land Tribunal. In the second point, the coalition criticised the non-autochthonous, whom were called “strangers”, for not acknowledging the position of the autochthonous in the community. The term “strangers” generated a series of loud arguments in the room. One man rised and fired: ”Are you calling me a ’stranger’? I am a part of Rotavu!” The man referred to his mother who came from the autochthonous nasara Rotavu. He had lived his whole life on the island, and so had his closest ancestors. Ahamb was his home. Another non-autochthonous man rised and argued that terming half of Ahamb’s

population”strangers” was nothing less than discrimination. Elder John Alsen, who was one of two church Elders leading the meeting, commented that he did not support the procedure in which the Chairman of Chiefs had been removed from his position. He argued that the dismissal of the chiefs had been decided by only a small group. Since Vanuatu is a democratic country and Ahamb a democratic community, he argued, the decision should be approved by a majority. It was decided to hold a vote for whether the sitting Council of Chiefs should resign. The results were 106 pro, 15 against, and 4 neutral.

The autochthonous coalition then presented their candidates for a new council. Despite a few objections, the new chiefs coming from Rotavu, Mrensa, and Marirau *nasara* were soon accepted. Afterwards, the coalition assured that they planned to appoint non-autochthonous chiefs as vice chiefs in the council at a later point. The temperature of the meeting had calmed down at this point. Some expressed surprise in that Robanias, a major autochthonous *nasara*, was neither present at the meeting (except for a few persons) nor included in the new council. A man of the coalition answered that Robanias too had been invited to take part, but had declined. Unfortunately, I was not able to find a clear answer to the absence of Robanias<sup>41</sup>.

Opinions continued to be exchanged in the now calm atmosphere of the dining hall. During the most intense stages of the dispute before the meeting was held, some non-autochthonous islanders had expressed concern about being thrown off the island. As the topic came up towards the end of the meeting, the autochthonous coalition assured that displacement was out of the question. People were allowed to stay as long as they wanted. The resigned chairman of the council, *jif* Andrew, raised and admitted that he did not know enough about the duties of a chief. His brother, Markina, proposed that there should be arranged workshops to learn how to become a good chief for the community. The new chairman, *jif* Herold, had long time experience as a chairman on Ahamb and now as a chief in the provincial chief’s council. At the end of the meeting *jif* Herold apologised for how the term “stranger” had come out, because no one were strangers on Ahamb. This term, he said, was abandoned years ago and was not to surface again. As the meeting came to an end, Deacon Josy of the Presbyterian Church gave a concluding appeal to the new chiefs, saying: ”You, the new Council of Chiefs must show yourself as good leaders. We will see you in church, at worships, and that you

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<sup>41</sup> It was said that some Robanias members had been supporting the Lanur sale, and the landseller had engaged in a political alliance with Robanias . There have also been major land disputes between Robanias and other autochthonous *nasara* earlier. An ongoing major dispute is Robanias’ denial of the autochthonous status of Marirau (see footnote in chapter 2: 12, and De Lannoy 2004:68-71). These points were probably among the reasons for Robanias’ reluctance to engage in the autochthonous coalition.

show yourselves as good Christians”.

### ***After the meeting***

When the meeting was over, a group of autochthonous young men were already busy cutting kava in one of the autochthonous villages. At dusk the relieved men of the coalition gathered there to celebrate the outcome of the meeting and to relax. Throughout the evening some non-autochthonous relatives came over to give encouraging talks and show their support. A non-autochthonous chief explained that, as far as he understood, the foreign *Bahriran* land tenure system would deprive all of them for rights to land. Many of the autochthonous were anxious about how the infringement today would be answered by the opposition. A non-autochthonous relative who had come over turned the question and asked: “what can they do? He said that all of the non-autochthonous live on the land of the autochthonous. They had no land on the island themselves, and have no option but to accept”.

A few days later I visited the cluster of hamlets where most of the non-autochthonous live. There was still some unrest and uncertainty among people there. Some were not sure whether or not they were meant to leave the island. Billy, who was autochthonous but neutral during the dispute, did not think the new Council of Chiefs would get much support. It was established with force, he argued, and did not follow democratic procedures sufficiently as only 120 people voted at the meeting. The following weeks, most people stayed in their own villages and kept a low profile. Most people I talked to expressed unease with the dispute and the division (*divisen*) that had emerged in the community. Some criticised the concept of fighting for land itself, as land was property of God and not for humans to fight over. One man expressed it this way: “Everyone on Ahamb are the children of God. We are *semak nomo* (just the same). God had created all land in the world to give a hand to people, to help them in their living. Not to be selfish about it”.

The weeks that followed, people continued to spend most time in their own villages when not going to the mainland gardens. After an evening meal with Afel and his family I asked why people seemed to engage so little with each other. Afel explained that this was a general response to disputes: “Someone is crossing against another and tells sorry afterwards... But the day after, when you meet him again, what shall you tell him?” People are generally reluctant about going to other villages on Ahamb. Many are afraid of being accused of planning sorcery or of becoming sorcery victims themselves. The time after disputes is

particularly critical in this matter as people might hold grudges. When a fundraising was arranged in Farun a few weeks after the meeting, many of the autochthonous opposing the Lanur sale were nervous about participating. Farun is rumoured to house sorcerers, and some of the men they had opposed lived in the village.

Slowly, however, people on Ahamb seemed to recapture the rhythm of daily life. In the Presbyterian Church the following Sunday, the new chiefs were prayed for and received the Pastor's blessing, as is the normal practice when chiefs are installed. The remaining time of my fieldwork, the new chiefs were often seen in church worship, as the Deacon had asked for when he closed the public meeting. The FIFA World Cup that received much interest among men, especially, attracted large numbers of people from all over Ahamb and the mainland to a provisoric "cinema" by the new school at Bñgavs. Also an outreach trip of the Sunday school that took place during the dispute helped draw people together. Fourteen leaders and sixtyeight children from Ahamb, Farun, and the new mainland settlements spent one week living together on Ahamb primary school. Here they practiced plays, songs, and dances to be performed on a weeklong trip to mainland villages from Milip in West to Farun in East. All *nasara* on the island were engaged in providing food for the group at different days of the week. The event reminded of a week of festivities. Everyone on the island were somehow engaged in the project, there were dress rehearals to watch, and people met up with relatives and friends from the mainland that came to contribute. Even though I do not think the timing was planned, the event suggested unity and common interest in children and the church to come into prominence at a time where attention was otherwise on divison and conflict.



*People gathering to watch a dress rehearsal of the Sunday school's outreach programme*

## ***The Process of the Dispute***

I suggest that looking at how the Lanur dispute progressed can provide us with some fruitful insights into the production of Ahamb community and its challenges. A useful tool for an analysis can be the four phases of the social drama as described by Victor Turner (1987 [1974]: 38-42). These phases include 1) the *breaching* of regular social relations, 2) a period of *crisis*, 3) the phase of *redressive action* to limit the spread of crisis, and 4) the phase of *reintegration*.

## ***The Breach***

The sale of Lanur and the support of the *Bahriran* land tenure system caused a serious breach of social relations between those who supported the events and those who opposed them. Most generally this came to mean the non-autochthonous against most autochthonous. We have seen that these events added up with earlier incidents in which a group of autochthonous felt that they were not properly acknowledged by the non-autochthonous for their status. All of these actions represented lack of fulfilling a “crucial norm regulating the intercourse of the parties” (1987 [1974]: 38), namely the acknowledgement of the autochthonous as the *manples* and legitimate group in control.

I suggest that the breach between factions on Ahamb illustrates how important land is to people in this area with regard to both material value and being able to control the course of development in one’s lifeworld. Most people on Ahamb and the surrounding mainland villages depend almost exclusively on horticulture for their subsistence. Control over land as well as marine territories is therefore crucial for securing present and future subsistence. It is here that people grow kava, copra, and catch the fish that makes up people’s possibilities for earning cash. The land areas with sea connection East of Farun are especially contested. Most gardens of Ahamb people are found in this area and it is also in this area that some Ahamb families have established new settlements. The new secondary school of Bñgavs is located here, and because of the recent population growth, tsunamiwarnings, and sea erosion on Ahamb, the government has planned a new health clinic to be established here to meet the expected relocation of Ahamb people. Beachfront land is also highly valued because of easy access to ships since there are no roads in the district. Also the possibilities for future development and land sales to foreigners, enhances the material value of this land. There have been and still are many disputes about these land areas, with claimants including people from Ahamb, Farun and elsewhere. To control these land areas implies securing future needs of

resources, residence, and money. But also controlling what course the development of the area will take. The *Bahriran* system, with its alternative methods of finding *kastom* landowners, would probably reduce drastically or even eliminate many Ahamb people's access to, and control of land.

### ***Crisis***

The second phase of Turner's social drama, the *crisis*, occurred as the breach between units expanded. The landseller and his supporters kept a steady course towards victory when National authorities demanded a stop in the court proceedings. This caused an increase in arguments and the split between the parties to widen. Terming the non-autochthonous "strangers" in the public meeting also caused a widening of the gap between groups based on patrilineal and territorial belonging. It even made people believe they had to leave the island. At this point the discursive division between the *manples* and non-autochthonous reached a zenith. It expressed an image of what Valeri terms the original state or "deepest level of being" as one of separation and thus suggesting a poly-ontology (Valeri 2001: 293, cf. Scott 2007: 13). The situation on Ahamb in this period corresponded well with Turner's argument that the stage of crisis is "always one of those turning points or moments of danger and suspense, when a true state of affairs is revealed, when it is least easy to don masks or pretend that there is nothing rotten in the village" (1987 [1974]: 39).

### ***Redressive Action***

The third phase is that of *redressive action*. At this point, "certain adjustive and redressive mechanisms are brought into operation by leading or structurally representative members of the disturbed social system" (Turner 1987 [1974]: 39). I suggest that the first part of the redressive phase could be observed towards the end of the public meeting. Here the autochthonous coalition made various corrections to the domination suggested by their action. The group made sure they did not want to evict anyone from the island, but that they only wanted to regain control. They also announced that non-autochthonous chiefs were planned to get seats in the new chief's council as vice-chiefs. The coalition also apologised for using the term "strangers" that they, after all, strongly discouraged themselves. Rather, no one was a stranger on Ahamb as they were all part of the same community and related through family and Christ.



According to Turner, it is in this phase that the society, group, or community is at its most “self-conscious”. Here, the redressive machinery shows itself as either capable of handling the crisis and restore some sort of order and peace between the contending groups, or it regresses to crisis (1987 [1974]: 41). By easing some of their demands and arguing how everyone on Ahamb is connected through kinship and Christ, the leaders of the coalition suggested community to be the desired social state on Ahamb and that mono-ontological notions might triumph the poly-ontological in the end.

### ***Reintegration***

The fourth and final phase of Turner’s model has two outcomes: Either the *reintegration* of the social group, or the social *recognition of an irreversible split* between the contesting parties. The latter is usually leading to the secession of one section of a village from the rest on permanent or temporary basis (1987 [1974]: 41). Some of the new mainland villages have resulted from this outcome, such as Renaur village as we saw in chapter two. Most of those who now live on the mainland for whatever reason, however, often visit Ahamb to see relatives and attend church meetings. This prevailing reproduction of relationships suggests a reconciliation or sociality at a different level of social integration, where the Ahamb community also comes to include the mainland villages established and settled by people previously living on the small island.

Even though I had to leave Ahamb not many weeks after the public meeting and therefore could not follow its aftermath in full, I nevertheless observed some tendencies towards a reintegration, at least for the time being. Most big disputes are orchestrated by men as they are in the forefront of politics, and some of the reconciliation processes I observed took typically place in male domains. An immediate sign after the public meeting was non-autochthonous men joining the autochthonous to drink kava where they also expressed support for the case. To me it also appeared that men more often went to public kavabars rather than spending most of the time at private kavasessions in the villages. Certain events such as the FIFA World Cup also helped drawing many men together at night to watch and discuss the matches. As in most other areas of community life on Ahamb, however, the most central space in which people seemed to unite was the church.

## ***The Church in the Dispute***

The church seemed to emerge at every stage of the dispute, if though implicitly and in the background of the action. The crisis and division of the community was included in the “Mother’s Prayer” and other communal prayers during the length of the crisis, and special prayers were organised addressing the crisis. On Ahamb people usually stay away from church worship if in a dispute. Thory and Greg, for example, were both committed Christians and regular churchgoers, but were also central figures in the autochthonous coalition. During the most intensive periods of the dispute, none of them wanted to go to church. Thory explained his choice to me the Sunday before the public meeting when he chose to stay at home instead of joining his family in worship:

... (when going to church) you must go with only one thought, and that is to praise God. If you go and think ‘I don’t want to see him now in church’ it means you have two thoughts. And you lose focus ... If you come to church and sit down in front flashing your long trousers and black shoes ... people will *toktok* (talk strongly, gossip) now, if you are in a situation like this. If you go to church without having everything settled (in a dispute with someone), it is not right (*no stret*). If everything will be alright tomorrow at the meeting, I can go to church. Because then (I) will be free from the painful unsolved things.

During this crisis and others, great emphasis was put on the church as a locus to help keeping the community together. A few weeks after the public meeting, Ahamb was visited by a team of Australian eye doctors that operated through churches in Vanuatu. Their examinations taking place outside of the Presbyterian Church was a true event that brought people of the island together in retreat and conversations as they observed the session and waited for their turn. I joined Skipson of the autochthonous Robanias and Markina of the non-autochthonous Manves in a conversation by the beach. During fieldwork I had enjoyed many good conversations with these men, and this day we came to discuss the dispute. They both talked about how the church was now to be a main place for refinding unity. Markina argued that: “we are family at bloodline, but also family at church. Even though disputes are dividing us, church must bring us together”. Graham, a man of the non-autochthonous Malmec, expressed the role of the church in similar terms:

Church makes that we stay at one place. That we stay united. That we talk with eachother. It is the most important place to meet others, in worshipping together. If one has trouble with another man, one does not go to church. One must confess first. It is a littlebit hard to go to church when in a dispute. It is hard that the two meet. They only meet at body, but not at their hearts.

I suggest that during and after the dispute, the church emerged as it usually does, as the community space for egalitarian and communal activities, opposing cultivation of competition and factional glory (Eriksen 2008: 160). That people appeared to seek back to community rather than persist in division, and that the church was attributed an important role in this process, makes it fruitful to have another look at value hierarchies and how they can play a role in Ahamb social processes.

### ***Value-Hierarchies***

As we have seen, Dumont has argued that every cultural system has one ultimate value which is the organisational locus of society and which encompasses competing counterparts.

Annelin Eriksen shows, in some of her central work, how notions of a predominant value can be useful to understand the social organisation and cultural systems of North Ambrym, Vanuatu (2008, 2009b). According to Eriksen, an Ambrym hierarchy varies significantly between ritual and everyday contexts that, even though they are interdependent, reveal contrasting social forms. Eriksen argues that these social forms are ultimately gendered as they represent male and female ways of relation making. The ritual context is most prominently represented by the male graded society called the *mage*. Here, men buy rights to ceremonial grades in the ritual hierarchy. This represents a way of relation making that involves male persons becoming the representations of a wide range of relations. Similar tendencies where one person stands out as the prime representation of the relationship also appears in kinship ceremonies such as weddings, circumcision ceremonies, and death ceremonies (2009b: 98).

The logic of everyday life, in contrast, is operated by egalitarian principles of mutual and cooperative work relationships that do not create the kind of personifications or hierarchies in relationships. Over the last decades, Eriksen argues, the church has become the main representation of the social form of everyday life, and the cooperative social form has thus gained a ritual context for its expression. The prominent position of the church in contemporary Ambrym society has implied a subordination of the traditional ritual context and the previously highly respected personified form in relationships. This has resulted in a reversal of the Ambrym value hierarchy.

The men of the *mage* in Ambrym had enormous social capacity and relations to ancestral spirits, and could hold dangerous powers over those with lower grades (2008: 85). Because

the *mage* ritual context emphasised cosmological forces, it was more highly valued than that of the everyday life (2009b: 101). When the church was established in North Ambrym in the early 1900s this previous ceremonial form that highlighted individual men's performances, was challenged by a new and contrasting form that did not apply a structure of personification. The high graded men first sought to establish the church as another representation of their eminence. But the missionaries denied the high graded men to apply the *mage* practice of excluding women, young men, and children from the church. Also, traditional objects and representations were not allowed in the church, and neither did it welcome the grand and materialist ceremonies of the *mage*. Rather, the social form of the church reflected the egalitarian and cooperate form of the everyday life, not focusing on singular persons but on the product of relationships (2009b: 102). Today, Eriksen argues, the social movement of the *mage* is in decline while the church has grown. This has implications for the form social relations take in today's Ambrym society. Now influence, status, and metaphysical power are no longer found in personifying ceremonies, but through the egalitarian institution of the church. The moral values of the church that Eriksen suggests are compatible with the female and value of social relationships, therefore come to encompass and subjugate the earlier more highly valued personalised male social form of the *mage* (2008: 162-166, 2009b: 107).

Somewhat similar to the Ambrym case, Ahamb too can be said to have two co-existing generalised logics or social forms with attributed worldviews. Also these take the character of values contradicting each other. The first logic is one of differentiation along the *nasara* and autochthonous/non-autochthonous divide that I base on Scott's poly-ontology (2007). This logic, implying a notion of separation, is as we saw in chapter two a structural necessity for Ahamb exogamous marriage practice. Otherwise, it typically emerges in disputes about land, as land and kin-groups are intimately connected. The second logic is one emphasizing unity, cooperation, and oneness, and is characterised by a mono-ontology related to the church<sup>42</sup>.

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<sup>42</sup> I think the gender aspect in these logics is less prominent on Ahamb than on Ambrym. On Ambrym, for example, only women have their own church organization (the PWMU), while on Ahamb there are also groups for men (Men's Fellowship) and youth of mixed gender (*Ol Yut*). According to the story, there were also men who brought and established the church. Most important, however, on Ahamb the male graded society was abandoned shortly after Christianity arrived more than a hundred years ago. On Ambrym the *mage* still exists. I think the co-existence of the two systems generate a sharper contrast between the church and the *mage* as ceremonial domains and "gendered-based" ideologies. The church and the social form it represents is thus perhaps less gendered than it is on Ambrym.

The predominant logic for living on Ahamb is, as it appears on Ambrym, that which is connected to the church. It is through the moral values found in church that relationships are supported and it is through the church that God, believed to be the predominant power in the universe, is mediated. As we saw in chapter three, the church on the island is understood to have proven many times that the power of the church and the Christian God is stronger than that of the pre-Christian- and general world in which humans reign. God is believed to be the ultimate power of the universe and to have the ability to do anything. This puts Christian values and the church on top of a hierarchy of values, positioned above the myths, practices, and beliefs of pre-Christian times (see Kolshus 2007: 16, Robbins 2009: 71). We have seen that disputes tend to imply a momentarily revival of poly-ontological principles to put forth arguments about right and control. A communal mono-ontological form, however, seems to encompass disagreements about land and politics in the end. This can suggest that most Ahamb people are unwilling to risk relationships between people and with the cosmological powers associated with the Christian God for self-interest in land and politics. If we are to extract a paramount value among Ahamb people, I suggest an interpretation can be something similar to “serve God and eachother”.

Even though Christianity and the church appear uncontested in an Ahamb value hierarchy, they also sometimes incorporate and communicate different and even contradictory meanings. When discussing land issues with some men, for example, it was suggested that it was God who had allocated territories to the different patrilineages. This supports poly-ontological assumptions in that the separate *nasara* are fixed and primordial. As we saw in the Lanur dispute, the autochthonous coalition was in prayers asking God for help if their claims were right. Others rejected the ontological categorisation of Ahamb people their claims implied, and meant that all land was ultimately God’s and not for humans to fight over. A dominant value connected to the church and Christianity can thus be said to take the character of Turner’s multivocal dominant symbol (2008 [1969]: 58). The multivocal symbol has many and sometimes bipolar designations. Turner argues that it represents the critical site of transition from secular to sacred ways of behaviour. As we have seen throughout the thesis, Christianity is more than an isolated ritual domain of Ahamb social life. Through its moral values that encourages relationships and community, and through the church as a general place of meeting, it is also to a large extent present in the non-ritual contexts of community life. We have seen that every ceremony and event on Ahamb involves the church in one way or another. Even *kastom* ceremonies that originally belong to a non-churchly context employ

Christian prayers and sermons (Eriksen 2008: 120). As we saw in chapter two, reconciliation ceremonies dealing with breakage of *kastom* obligations for the *tambu*, were completed with prayers and blessings from a church representative. Sermons and prayers were also arranged with the ritual *kakai blong ded* that we saw in chapter four, originally based on a *kastom* practice. The church can therefore be said to have gained contexts for its expression even inside of the domain of the contrasting social form, represented by *kastom* and notions of a poly-ontology (Eriksen 2009b:106). Even though interpretations and use of Christianity varies, the ontological conflict seems to vanish by the hierarchical ordering of values that pays precedence to the communal mono-ontological logic. Therefore the gradual reintegration from the Lanur dispute, as far as I came to know it, did not bring about a serious “logical scandal” as there was no serious “intermingling” between the two “levels” of the value hierarchy (Dumont 1980: 242).

### ***Christianity, Continuity and Change***

Christianity is a relatively recent phenomenon on Ahamb. To appoint the church as representing a paramount cultural value therefore leads us to the debate on Christianity and its role in bringing cultural change (Barker 2003, Knauff 2002, Robbins 2004, 2009) or if it is merely a continuation of previous cultural elements (Mosko 2010). Joel Robbins (2009: 66) has argued that radical cultural change should be understood to take place only when values change. This, he suggests, is either because new values are introduced, or because the relation between traditional values is shifting. From Ambrym, Eriksen shows that while certain elements of pre-Christian ceremonial life have persisted, Christianity can be understood to have brought some fundamental changes in Ambrym social organisation and cultural values. These changes are most generally seen in the personified social form of the *mage* being surpassed by the egalitarian institution of the church. This has further transformed Ambrym gender relations, for example in the gender-neutral church replacing the male exclusive ceremonial ground (*harl*) as the ceremonial domain (2008: 118). Robbins (2004, 2009) argues that among the Urapmin of inner Papua New Guinea, Christianity and other colonial and post-colonial elements has brought with them a dramatic change transforming the dominant value from “relationism” to “individualism”. The typical Melanesian value of the relation (see Robbins 2004: 291-292, Gregory 1982, Strathern 1988, Wagner 1986), Robbins suggest, involves relations being valued most highly, and other elements being evaluated on the basis of their ability to help create and maintain these relations (2009: 80). The recent value of

“individualism” that came with Christianity, in contrast, is based on salvation of the individual as the main goal. The salvation is individual in that it is guaranteed by the state of the individual’s own soul, and is sometimes even achieved by a measure of withdrawal from the social world (2009: 81).

The introduction of Christianity on Ahamb does not seem to have brought about the same profound changes in cultural values as among the Urapmin. The relationship still appears as part of an Ahamb paramount value, even though notions of individualism are also present. On Ahamb as among the Urapmin, Christian salvation itself is believed to happen individually. The road to salvation, however, is believed to arise from engagement in relationships. As we saw in chapter three and four, sharing, giving of gifts, and humble acknowledgement of other people and of God all represent important aspects of living a “good Christian life”. The form Christianity has taken on Ahamb thus seems to comply more with relationships than individualism. Ahamb emphasis on relationships, both with other persons and with God, may thus represent a degree of continuation of pre-Christian cultural values, rather than change.

One reason for Christianity’s contrasting effect on dominant values in the two places can probably be found in how the new religion was introduced. While Ahamb became a mission station at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a bulk of the Urapmin had not yet converted by the mid 1970s. Among the Urapmin there was a rather sudden introduction of charismatic Christianity and other colonial cultural elements that differed significantly from their own. The Presbyterian Christianity on Ahamb was to a larger degree subject to indigenous interpretations and local control, and got to develop over a longer period of time. Ahamb people played themselves an active role in “desacralising” traditional culture and “sacralising” Christianity (Mosko 2010: 233). This give reason to believe that some central values and ideas could persist, and that Christian values and beliefs implied a fullfilment of what already exist rather than a denial of them (Scott 2007: 303-306). The active role of Ahamb people in the development of external institutions is probably a reason why their post-colonial agency seems stronger than in Knauft’s description of the Gebusi. The Gebusi were first contacted by colonial representatives in 1962, and had at Knauf’s visit in 1998 not been able to participate as much as Ahamb people in the forming of colonial processes and their expression.

This is not to say that Christianity has not brought changes from the pre-Christian life. The male graded society, separate cooking fires, sacrifice to traditional spirits, and legitimate uses

of sorcery have all been abolished. Many other traditions are forgotten after the church prohibited their practice. What I argue is that the typical Melanesian value of relationships seems persist as a predominant one.

The playing out of the Bible Operation, that might otherwise support notions of individualism, can illustrate this point. In the Bible Operation, every person in the community must make an individual pledge to not commit sorcery. As I have argued in chapter three, the pledge is in practice not only one between the individual and God (that itself makes it relational), but also one between the individual and the remaining members of the community. Every person makes a promise to not do harm to one another. Simultaneously they also display an acknowledgement of powers that encompass the individual. These powers, I argue, are for most people, either or both: 1) God, understood as the paramount cosmological power to which one must engage in a reciprocal relationship for protection and provision, and 2) the remaining community that defines sorcery as intolerable and peaceful relationships as the model for sociality.

The works of the Bible Operation may still be understood to encourage individualism, however. As we saw in chapter three, the pledge includes to not discourage thoughts (*killim tingting*) and business (*killim bisnis*). These discouragements are typically attributed to sorcery, such as *nawoshwosh* that deprive people of power to make work and proceed with ideas. Sorcery, in all of its forms, can be seen as essentially anti-social as it causes misery to other people. But images of sorcery can also be seen as a vehicle to discourage anti-social tendencies, as it is usually directed towards persons standing out from the social group. Persons who engage in moneymaking but who fail to share their profit to maintain social relationships are especially vulnerable to sorcery. When I was on Ahamb, Tom Hanzel, whose previous store was struck by *nawoshwosh*, was again engaged in business selling petrol. He told me he was not afraid to do business again. The reason, he said, was that the Bible Operation now curbed people's jealousy and their chance to sanction people with sorcery. The church can thus withdraw from the community one of the most prominent and feared traditional sanctions to individualist behaviour. I argue, however, that Ahamb Christianity seems to house similarly powerful mechanisms to discourage individualist tendencies. This includes the scorning accusations of having *hae tingting* (think highly of oneself) that is connected to the moral values of both kinship and Christianity. As we saw in chapter three and four, to have *hae tingting* reflects a person having individual aspirations in which



relationships are ignored, as well as a failure to acknowledge God as the ultimate “boss of life” (*boss blong laef*).

As mentioned, also the engaged of God is on Ahamb believed to be based on relationships. A strong relationship to God that leads to provisions and eventually salvation is based on the logic of exchange in thanksgivings, payment of tithes, trust, and prayers. A good relationship with God is also about having a good relationship to other people. This is because a “good Christian life” is to a large extent about living according to Christian moral values that emphasise sharing, giving and the respect of other people.

My argument is that the typical Melanesian value of relationships persists as of paramount importance in Ahamb society. Conversion to Christianity, even though bringing many changes, seems not to have altered this central cultural value. I argue that Ahamb Christianity as it is exemplified in the prominent ritual of the Bible Operation, can be seen as merely a “ritual juncture” in which the expression of anti-social critique is transformed while the meaning to it persists. For now, then, by sharing a similar dominant value of the relation, the ritual context of the church and the remaining domains of society can be understood as mutually integrating in following the same goal. Therefore, neither of them provide a strong opposition to this value hierarchy.

## 6 Concluding Remarks

The study has tried to answer some fundamental questions of how community is produced on Ahamb Island in Vanuatu, and what the main challenges to its persistence are.

The challenges include land disputes, a lack of acknowledgement of expected norms for relationships, and ideas and ideals that deprive persons from social relationships. I suggest that the main mechanisms for producing community are the works of the church, the comprehensive and multiple bonds of kinship, and a general morality of gifts and acknowledgements of social relations. If trying to find a conclusion, it will be that most Ahamb people cultivate values that are connected to a cooperative and unifying social logic. This logic encompasses counter-logics of conflict and separation, and, in the end, make notions of a community to persist despite obstacles on the road.

I have suggested that to “serve God and each other” works as a dominant value in Ahamb society. This value is to a high degree about the production of relationships; a condition for the solidarity and “togetherness” that also advocates for the production of Ahamb notions of community. I suggest that an acknowledgement of relationships is present already in the island’s kinship structure. The three generational exogamous marriage system creates multiple relations between affinal kin that remain with descendents for generations. Certain codes for interaction govern most relationships between kin, and common for them all is that they explicitly or implicitly advocates for a socially integrating interaction. We saw in chapter four that gift reciprocity is an important practice in the morality of kinship and community. When someone fails to acknowledge relationships this is usually sanctioned in one way or another, for example through images of sorcery.

The church seems to be the main domain, and the most durable, in which community on Ahamb is produced and maintained. The Presbyterian Church is the dominant community institution on the island and assembles a majority of the population for common worship at least once a week. People are also connected through church groups, and various community-organisations and committees operated by the church. The church is also suggesting a mono-ontological orientation in which people are undifferentiated and unified as they are all created in God’s image. The Christian God is regarded as the predominant cosmological power, and the logic of His operation complies with the value of relationships. Engaging in a productive relationship with God, for example, is regarded as important to secure provision and

protection. To be able to receive God's gifts, people offer their prayers, thanksgivings, and a lifestyle according to Christian moral values. These moral values include giving, sharing, equality, and to acknowledge human inferiority to God. Ahamb ways of interpreting the works of God and of operating the Presbyterian Church involve many ideas about relationships that are also present in the non-churchly context. I suggest that the interplay between the central cultural domains of church and kinship, that both emphasise similar values of cooperation and relationships, represent a key mechanism for producing community on Ahamb.

As we have seen, it may seem that a notion of equality of all relations in a totally egalitarian social structure can also be a threat to the social order (Toren 1989:14). Land is tremendously important to people in South Malakula, not only in matters of identity and belonging, but also for subsistence and asserting a sense of control over one's life world. We have seen that when there is dispute about rights to control land and its activities, a differentiation of islanders and separation of contesting groups may occur. This was evident when a latent hierarchy between autochthonous and non-autochthonous Ahamb islanders, based on patrilineal connection to land, was challenged in chapter two. Even though an equal social structure is desired and cultivated in most contexts, conflicts emerge when a hierarchy of social relations is challenged. It can therefore be argued that Ahamb community maintains its social order by both assuming and denying differentiation and hierarchy between groups (Rio 2007:223).

In my analysis of the Lanur dispute in chapter five, however, I suggested that the dynamics of community and separation seems to be guided by a hierarchy of values in which peaceful "togetherness" is the desired state that most people seek. Even though predominant values are directed towards a communal social form, this does not mean that Ahamb community, as localised on the small island, will persist in an everlasting future.

The rumours in Port Vila about a prompt mass-relocation of Ahamb people to the mainland turned out to be highly exaggerated. During my fieldwork, a share of the island population was nevertheless preparing to leave Ahamb and had started to prepare a home on the mainland. Most people expressed that they would prefer to stay on the island. But as the population keep growing there is less and less space and resources for dwelling. Questions of land rights also restrict people's freedom and chance to putter with their own projects. Many understood the best solution for the future to be that the respective *nasara* settled in mainland areas where they are themselves the rightful *kastom* owners. Many of the areas considered for

new settlements are rather close to each other along the South Malakulan coastline, and included in most people's prospects of a future life on the mainland was a community centre that would house a big church, health clinic, and primary and secondary school. A dream was also to establish an airfield by this new community centre to boost development. Relocation and establishment of a future mainland community centre was also a topic of a big community meeting towards the end of my fieldwork. The chiefs appointed this to be a major task in the proceeding work of the chief's council. There were plans to seek out an appropriate area on the mainland, sort out land rights, and make a proper agreement with the *kastom* landowners.

Maybe it is, even though paradoxically so, that a fission is the most feasible way to maintain peaceful relationships as the population continues to grow, land-disputes persist, and fragmented opinions seems more and more pressing?



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